



John Whitberg

**The Man with the
Periwinkle Eyes
Volume III: Hear the
Mountains Cry**

Hear the Mountains Cry

*The Man with the Periwinkle Eyes,
Volume III*

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Epigraph

“But what after all are man’s truths?
They are his irrefutable errors.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Foreword

I hardly know how to introduce what is to follow, as I believe the necessary historical groundwork has been thoroughly laid. The one concept left to explain, I suppose, is the concept and mechanics of stargates. There are two kinds of stargates. The first, less common, is the artificial stargate, which is the kind described in the first volume. These are devices which, essentially, create an artificial and temporary wormhole via a quantum computer.

The second, more common kind of stargates are the natural variety. While I, as a non-physicist, am unable to explain fully the mechanics of natural stargates, I will try my best.

Natural stargates are essentially “soft spots.” Naturally occurring wormholes which appear whenever two points in time and space line up correctly, and have a strong enough connection that a wormhole results. The physics of this are not fully understood, however they are predictable to an extent, and while the majority of natural stargates close after a period, or move, some are stable, and any stargate may be contained within a magnetic cage, though this will not stop it from closing. All of this is useful to remember going forward.

One further bit of introduction; this book takes place over what Kyle refers to as “The Quiet Era.” December 1986 through mid-1992. After the Reign of Terror, but before the demographic shifts of Project Phoenix which began less than a year after the end of the Cold War. Kyle calls it this because it is the quietest period of his life. Within Project Phoenix, this time is known as “The Reconstruction Era.”

As always; enjoy the ride.

Chapter 1

Kyle and Norma Jean emerged from battery 113 and looked up to Camp Hero's permanent sunset sky to see that, indeed, a ship was arriving. A huge black affair, triangular, sleek, and matte. A Nacht Waffen ship.

Kyle: "That'll be my benefactor, I should expect. I must be there to greet him. Are you coming?"

Norma Jean: "I suppose so. I met Emmermann once. Embarrassing experience for him, and I do so enjoy seeing people squirm."

Kyle laughed heartily at this, and he and Norma Jean set out towards the landing pad area, where the ship was already beginning to land. A ramp lowered from the bottom, and a group of soldiers dressed in all black, save the silver swastikas on their left breast patches. There must have been 20 such soldiers, who didn't pay the slightest attention to the crowd as they began marching into Camp Hero, with Emmermann behind them, in full SS regalia, directing.

Emmermann: "Right, boys. I want my assets I named found and I want the damage assessed. I expect full reports. Kyle! On scene punctually as always. How fucked are the German barracks?"

Kyle: "I believe they're in good enough condition, Sir."

Emmermann: "Fine. We'll set up shop there for the day."

Kyle wondered how Jimmy would feel about this when he found out.

Beside Emmermann stood Georg. The latter rushed down the ramp out of the ship to greet Kyle, and Kyle rushed forward as well to greet his oldest friend.

“Any way I can help you celebrate?” Georg asked as he and Kyle began walking into Camp Hero.

“Buy me a hooker?” Kyle said.

Georg laughed.

“I’ll see what I can do. I imagine you’ll be getting a few days off.”

“Good!” Kyle said. “Now come with me, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

The crowd around Emmermann’s ship began to disperse. Whatever happened next was hardly in their hands. And so Kyle led Georg below ground, towards the armory, to meet Harune. Harune and Georg became fast friends, and very soon, Georg was teaching Harune about the weapons he was helping to sort. The armory was still a chaotic mess. Max pulled Kyle aside, and the two spoke in low voices.

Max: “So, Dad, what the fuck is happening now? Is Opa here? I assume he must be, with Georg?”

Kyle: “Yes. Beyond that is much uncertainty. Your grandfather wants control. Total control. But there’s not a chance in hell that he’ll get it. We need to expect more arrivals, and perhaps violence. Take a gun for yourself, Kid.”

Max: “You really think it’ll come to that?”

Kyle: “It’s better to have and not need than it is to need and not have.”

With a shrug, Max walked to one of the armory shelves and grabbed himself a small plasma pistol which resembled a Walther PPK, as well as several extra plasma ammo clips. These, Max easily hid in his waistband, covered by his sweatshirt, with a wink at Kyle, which Kyle returned.

As it turned out, it didn't ever "come to that." However, the threat loomed multiple times. Within hours of Emmermann's arrival, Air Force ships began to arrive, as well as convoys coming in through the permanent portals. This included, at one point, a tank attempting to enter the aboveground Egypt gate, however, the tank was unable to fit, forcing the soldiers who came through to do so on foot. Soon enough, American Navy craft also began to arrive, followed by silver sausage-shaped transport ships carrying what must have been corporate personnel, judging by the suits and pencil skirts that the unloaded wore.

Multiple times, the arriving parties came with guns drawn or raised. But Camp Hero was not to be bullied anymore, and was always at the ready with their own artillery. Not a single shot was fired, that Kyle can recall, save for one incident.

This incident occurred about 24 hours after the arrivals began. A group of Air Force personnel carrying flamethrowers approached battery 113, and Kyle and a few other soldiers, including Gregory Mulgrave, saw them and immediately sensed their intentions of burning the evidence of atrocities.

"Hey! Fuck off!" someone from Kyle's group shouted.

"These are our orders man!" one of the Air Force personnel shouted back, then turned his flamethrower to the building.

One of the soldiers in Kyle's group, a tall and very young blonde gent whose name Kyle didn't know, took matters into his own hands. The soldier raised his shotgun, and with a precision of aiming only possible with enhancements, blasted the flamethrower from the hands of the Air Force man who had turned to face battery 113. Kyle responded next, sending a telekinetic pulse or shockwave which knocked the flamethrower wielders on their backs. The soldiers by Kyle then quickly

approached, their shotguns raised, surrounding the Air Force personnel.

“What part of ‘fuck off’ did you not understand?” Kyle asked, his voice a deadly calm, as he stood separated from one of the Air Force men only by the length of his shotgun.

The Air Force men gulped and ran. Apparently they hadn’t been informed that they were not in a “normal” situation, and that the soldiers they’d be coming face to face with wouldn’t be “normal” either.

For several days, “lights out” became a thing of the past. People slept, sure, but only in shifts. Due to the damage in the underground, where most of the offices were kept, the bunks in the barracks were moved outside and the barracks became the new offices. A group of large houses once lived in by officer elites were commandeered by a few soldiers in order to house the children. Kyle took to guarding these houses, and had Max and Harune stay in them. Jack Flynn took this same course of action for Andrew’s sake. Sondra and Jason found some other crowd to vanish into.

It was a chaotic week, and as Kyle was not included in any decision-making processes, he didn’t know how the next stage of Project Phoenix was ruled on. However, a strategy was formed, and word spread throughout Camp Hero; dispersal was the new strategy.

Author’s note. It has begun. The new stage of Project Phoenix is underway, and the “quiet period” has begun. I hope the reader is excited to move forward with it and Kyle’s story.

Chapter 2

Before I describe the exodus from Camp Hero, I must report some key info that Kyle was told shortly after the dispersal strategy had been decided on, but prior to the process beginning. Kyle was never without his glass pad, and upon it, he received a message calling him to Jimmy's makeshift office, in a warehouse building near Montauk Township. Gathering his guns, Kyle set out on the walk, which was over a mile from the building he was guarding.

The walk took Kyle to a part of Camp Hero which he had never properly visited; a hilly, thickly forested area with a number of small parks and a rather high preponderance of ponds. All around the forested parts, chimneys protruded from the ground, betraying that there were many bunkers in the area.

The largest building in this area was the one Kyle approached. It was a metal warehouse, painted a light turquoise. Kyle noted a huge Fig Leaf Oak which grew beside it. An uncommon tree in New York. "Who had planted it?" Kyle wondered.

Kyle approached and entered the building. Judging by the interior, it had until recently been a store for certain luxury goods. Wines, cheeses, desserts, fancy breads, and so on. These had been cleared, of course. Either the children of Camp Hero had raided the place themselves, or some soldiers had taken the goods to distribute them. Only the signs and shelves remained. A number of tables in the center had been pulled aside, making room for two large desks, where Jimmy and, to Kyle's slight surprise, Ezekiel sat. Jimmy stood as Kyle entered.

Jimmy: "Afternoon, Kyle. Thank you for coming in."

Kyle: "Afternoon, Jimmy, Ezekiel. I hope this is a good sign? I've been nervous about my job."

This was slightly true. Kyle intuitively knew that he wouldn't be allowed to leave Project Phoenix. Emmermann would see to that. But Kyle was nervous about his possible position under Jimmy's reign, as well as those whom he might be separated from.

Jimmy: "I suppose I can understand that. I brought you in here today because I was reviewing your past work and came across something which piqued my interest. A mission in Okinawa. Do you recall it?"

Kyle: "Rather difficult to forget. Without it I wouldn't exist, as your predecessor drove home. Why?"

And so Jimmy explained, at last telling Kyle of the Camp Hero artificial intelligence, who had been running Project Phoenix since the beginning, unbeknownst to nearly all participants, as was the 11th sublevel which it existed on.

"And what am I to do with this information? What's it got to do with Okinawa?" Kyle asked once Jimmy had briefed him.

"Isn't it obvious?" Ezekiel asked, finally interjecting; "You held your own against the AI in Okinawa. That's what we need going forward. We want someone now who will relay the orders of the AI and give us the power to resist it when necessary. We want an interpreter, not a conduit."

"And if I should refuse?" Kyle asked, though he didn't intend to do so.

"Then you refuse." Jimmy said simply. "We'd find someone else, and you'd suffer no consequences. However, I'd appreciate if you didn't refuse, especially since you're to be leaving with the AI to Colorado."

Kyle: "Moving? The project is leaving?"

Jimmy: "I'm sure you know this already, but yes, we're dispersing. Keeping any single group from gaining control. I will be remaining on the skeleton crew here at Camp Hero. But the AI has expressed a desire to move, to one of the bases to which were dispersing. Specifically, Cheyenne Mountain Complex, Colorado."

Kyle: "And I'm to move?"

Jimmy: "Yes. It's what your benefactor wishes, apparently. Has he not spoken to you?"

Kyle: "He never speaks to me. But I suppose the Colorado air will do my boys some good. Perhaps I should meet the AI? I accept your proposal."

Kyle had decided to take this opportunity to stake his family's claim in the new Project Phoenix. He instinctively knew it was the best offer he'd get, and Kyle was not one for stagnation either.

Jimmy smiled, no doubt sensing Kyle's intention.

Jimmy: "I had a feeling. Yes, you should meet the AI. Ezekiel, would you mind walking him?"

Ezekiel stood from his desk, in apparent acceptance, as Jimmy continued.

Jimmy: "The only entrance there is separate from the others you've used. It's near here. Going to be a lot of stairs. Sorry, that elevator was fucked. I also send Ezekiel because he's going to be heading up our efforts in Colorado. At any rate, I hope this is fruitful for you, Kyle."

Kyle: "I fail to see how it could be otherwise."

Ezekiel then led Kyle outside of the turquoise store building and into the forest, finally opening a trapdoor which at one time had likely led to one of the many bunkers which filled this area. Now however, the stairs descended directly into the Earth, and when the bottom was reached, it was only to allow the stairs to

turn and descend further. There must have been 30 flights of stairs, of varying levels of steepness. It was hard to believe they only descended 11 levels, though given the wildly uneven design of Camp Hero in general, it was not impossible.

As they walked, Kyle and Ezekiel chatted. It was the first time they'd ever truly talked, and the first time they learned what each other did. Ezekiel, it turned out, was in interspecies relations. He worked for the Air Force proper, rather than Project Phoenix by itself, and his job description mostly meant acting as a go-between of the Air Force and whatever alien species was of concern. After Jimmy, Ezekiel was the highest in chain of command post-revolution, though as Jimmy was working to bring Roth back, this was likely to soon change.

Kyle, for his part, spoke of his usual subjects; his sons, his missions, his women, and his music, in that order. Ezekiel apparently knew Max from Max's own missions, and expressed fondness, affectionately referring to Max as "that foul mouthed little Brit," which made Kyle guffaw.

Soon enough, the men reached sublevel 11, indicated by the stairs finally ending, and an ancient metal door at the bottom, which Ezekiel opened. Kyle and Ezekiel entered into a cave system. Not hallways; caves, lit only by miners' lights. "At least the poor lighting is consistent," Kyle thought ruefully.

Ezekiel led Kyle through the cave system a ways to another large metal door, which Ezekiel once again opened, ushering Kyle into the most unnerving space he had ever been in.

The room Kyle and Ezekiel was large and perfectly round, obviously carved unlike the caves which connected to it. A set of steps led down several feet further into the ground, surrounding a cube approximately the size of a car, perfectly carved from a black rock which could not be identified. The walls were filled with tiny holes of unknown purpose. The room was lit by an

ethereal green light which emanated from seemingly nowhere. A barely audible clicking whirred in the background.

Kyle felt, rather than heard, the AI enter his mind. Instantly, it knew every thought he had ever thought, and everything he had ever done, and knew Kyle better than he could ever hope to know himself.

Kyle was instantly awash in a feeling unfamiliar to him; fear. Not fear for life or for another's safety. No. Rather, Kyle felt the undefinable Eldritch terror one feels when one is suddenly and undeniably in the presence of an Entity which is beyond comprehension and which has no godly right to exist on the same plane as anyone who is unequal to its power.

After a few seconds, the light filling the room changed to blue and the Entity commanded Kyle to step forward to the cube. Kyle could have turned and left, yet he was never more powerless as when he approached the cube and, again under the Entity's command, laid his hand on it. This action allowed the Entity to exit Kyle's body and reenter the cube.

What followed is hard to describe. It was not a "conversation" in the traditional sense. The Entity knew Kyle's thoughts before he was even conscious of thinking them, and would answer them instantly. It was a kind of omniscient telepathic exchange that I, as an author, do not have the language to express or describe.

The Entity made it clear that it accepted Kyle as its go-between. And that it accepted Kyle in general. Through the Camp Hero computer system, it had already known him, however, until he'd entered its space, Kyle's mind had not been at risk. Now, the Entity could access his mind at any time it wished. Or so it claimed. It then simply retreated, allowing Kyle and Ezekiel to leave.

Kyle walked back through the cave in a daze, his mind both too activated and too emptied to focus on anything except that which was directly in front, so that he inevitably tripped. The feeling of Ezekiel's hands helping him up snapped Kyle to attention again, and he turned to Ezekiel.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Kyle demanded, knowing full well that Ezekiel couldn't answer, and indeed he didn't, thus Kyle was left shaken and unable to think clearly as he and Ezekiel resurfaced and made their way back to Jimmy's office.

Jimmy: "That was a fast return. I suppose it went well?"

Still somewhat dazed, Kyle sat on one of the empty tables.

Kyle: "I suppose yes. The..... thing accepts me. Should I bother asking what the fuck it is?"

"I would tell you if I knew. But what good would it do you to know?" Jimmy asked.

"None, I suppose," Kyle said with a shrug.

Jimmy pulled a bottle of Corelian from his desk, and while Kyle of course felt no metabolic effects, it was comforting in some fashion anyway, drinking whiskey in silence.

"Fuck," Kyle said at last. "If you've no further orders, Jimmy, I'm going to go find myself a good woman. Then I'm going to think."

"The first sounds good. The second, don't bother," Jimmy said with a chuckle and a hand wave, and so Kyle left.

Kyle did find a woman. Or rather, she found him, on a forest path, as he was making his way back to the more populated areas of the compound. The woman in question was Nancy Berg.

Nancy: "Kyle! Just the man I was looking for."

Kyle: "Hello, Nancy. Why were you looking for me? I was looking for..... stress relief."

Nancy shrugged.

Nancy: "Well Kyle. I know what you mean by that, and I know that such has been our arrangement. I came to say goodbye Kyle. Nothing more."

Kyle: "Goodbye? Goodbye to where?"

Nancy looked wistfully into the permanent sunset as she spoke next.

"I have no fucking idea. Which is why I'm doing it. Tomorrow I'm taking one of the leaving ships bound for Canis. And then I'm going to drift until either I find home, or a new position finds me. I cannot stay here. We don't know each other well, Kyle, but I enjoyed your company. And now, I don't expect I'll ever see you again."

Kyle stepped to Nancy, and resisting all his urges, simply leaned over and gave Nancy a peck on the cheek.

"Good luck," was all Kyle said. It was all that seemed appropriate.

Kyle restarted his walk back to the busier parts of the compound. Nancy Berg did not follow, apparently wishing to be alone, and her words proved true; Kyle never saw Nancy Berg again.

Kyle reached the more crowded part of the compound, and after not much hunting, did indeed find the "stress relief" he was seeking. Conditions weren't ideal, as Kyle and the woman had to head into the woods and keep noise minimal, seeing as all the buildings had been requisitioned to house children, officers, or to host administrative duties, and the underground was totally closed off. However, it did bring Kyle fully back to reality, and he walked away determined to continue his work as he always had.

By this point, a little over a fortnight after the revolution, lights out had been reimplemented, although less harshly. Gone were the days of patrols with murderous dogs. Now, one simply

went to sleep at lights out because it was the practical thing to do. This night, Kyle was sleeping outside one of the children's barracks, which were sealed every night to keep the ages separate. Kyle had specifically asked to be posted outside this barrack, as it was where Max and Harune slept.

Kyle was awoken not by the usual intercom wake up announcements which bathed Camp Hero every morning, but by the low, unmistakable vibration of an arriving ship. Kyle slowly opened his eyes and saw that, indeed, a Nacht Waffen ship had arrived, and so had, at last, the time for people to begin leaving.

An intercom announcement did come; "All outbound personnel, please line up on the eastbound path towards Landing Pad A. Thank you for your service and Godspeed." Jimmy's voice. Was it just the intercom, or did his voice have a crack in it?

One by one, the barracks began opening, and the houses in the residential areas began emptying, the paths and roads becoming clogged with excited people of all ages triumphantly holding up their wristbands. Max and Harune quickly found their way to Kyle, and he ordered them to stay close.

For days, a team had been sweeping Camp Hero, distributing and attaching to everyone color-coded, non-removable wristbands, with the color indicating the group or faction one would be leaving with. Black for Nacht Waffen, indigo for American Navy, green for USMC, red for corporate programs, goldenrod for the Japanese Breakaway, lavender for programs ran by foreign Earth powers, and finally white for those remaining with Project Phoenix or the Air Force but dispersing. The virtually invisible minority (less than 200 persons, it would turn out) who were remaining at Camp Hero wore no wristbands.

How it was decided where each person would go, we're unlikely to ever know. Indeed, it's unlikely that much thought

went into it. The arrangements had been made such that wherever the assets went, they'd be happier than they had been at Camp Hero, and that was ultimately all that seemed to matter.

Eventually, all the assets had made their way to the path and lined it, standing on either side. It was only then that Kyle got a glimpse of the true enormity of Project Phoenix. Over 200,000 souls lined up, as far as the eye could see, to leave at last and for good. Kyle, being security, stood near the front. The Nacht Waffen ship hovered in the sky, and slowly, others followed, from other factions. The hubbub died down, as all eyes locked on the ships, awaiting the shuttles to pick them up.

Finally, a new announcement came on the intercom, again Jimmy's voice.

"I have just received word that the shuttles will begin descending in a few moments. Everyone, please bow your heads for a moment of silence for those who couldn't live to see this day."

All heads bowed. After the moment of silence, the sound of music began wafting over the intercom, and Kyle glanced to the front of the line to see Norma Jean playing a few notes on a guitar, using an earpiece which connected her to the intercom. After a few notes, Norma Jean began to sing the following song.

May God's blessing keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay
Forever young

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
And may you stay
Forever young

Forever young
Forever young
May you stay
Forever young

May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
May your song always be sung
And may you stay
Forever young

Forever young
Forever young
May you stay
Forever young

Almost as Norma Jean finished, the first shuttle landed, and a Nacht Waffen officer with a glass pad stepped forward, asking for “100 black wristbands.” They came forward, huddling together, and walked to load onto the shuttle. And so it

continued, shuttles descending one by one, with someone always stepping forward and calling for any number of persons with a certain color wristband. Those nearest the front always went first, allowing the line to move up. White wristbands were never called for.

There were, as expected, many tearful goodbyes. At one point, Max broke from Kyle to rush to a departing party and tearfully hug a blonde girl goodbye. Kyle to this day doesn't know this girl's identity. Max did not volunteer, and it would have seemed somehow disrespectful to ask.

Eventually, the last shuttle left, leaving about 20,000 persons. An intercom announcement came, ordering all those who remained to make their way to the main road, for the final dispersal. They found about 150 covered military trucks waiting for them. A batch of trucks would call for a group of people bound for a certain base, and they would depart. Kyle found himself standing next to Sondra Saunders-Roth and Jason, and when a voice called out for "Fort Worden," Sondra and Jason turned to walk towards it. When Kyle did not follow, Jason turned.

"Are you not coming?" Jason asked.

Overcome, Kyle got on one knee and hugged Jason tightly.

"I can't come, Jason. I hope I'll see you again. Don't lose that little spark you have. Promise me," Kyle said through tears.

Suddenly serious, Kyle stood and faced Sondra.

"Give that sweet boy a chance. Quit being such a selfish cunt," Kyle said, his voice dripping with deadly seriousness.

A look came over Sondra's face. A look best described as a defiant surrender. But she said nothing, and merely took Jason's hand, turning to leave.

Before long, the assembly leaving for Cheyenne Mountain was called. Kyle took Max and Harune's hands, and they set for

one of the trucks. Tsurabaya and Norma Jean wound up loading onto the same truck as Kyle and sons, but in the crush, it was difficult to see who else he knew ended up on the transport. It seemed that over half of the white wristbands were aboard.

After a few minutes, the trucks set out, to drive presumably to one of the above ground portals to take their passengers to Cheyenne Mountain and into, as ever, an uncertain future.

Author's note. A landmark chapter in historical significance. I trust the reader will remember it.

Chapter 3

As expected, the trucks bound for Cheyenne Mountain drove through one of the permanently open portals on the western side of Lake Montauk. The occupants of the trucks could see where they were going only judging by what was visible from the backs of the trucks. They first saw the large blue portal, which opened into what seemed to be a large concrete parking garage. All alighted into it, gaining a better view.

The parking garage was several square miles in size, and of smooth concrete. Portals stood in all of the four walls, at odd intervals. There must have been 20 such portals. The garage was packed with military vehicles of all kinds, for both on and off planet use.

Kyle's first thought was for the AI; how had it been transported here? Or had it transported itself in some way? Kyle scanned the crowd unloading from the trucks. His gaze rested on one truck from which a group of soldiers were unloading a wooden box about the size of a car. That must be it, Kyle thought, especially once he saw that Ezekiel was directing the unloading of the box.

Kyle's next thought was of who else he knew of the arrivals, and so he examined the crowd of nearly 1,500. Kyle saw, to his relief, both Flynn's. Max would have been very unhappy to be without his best friend for who knows how long. Kyle also saw Brian Foster, though there was no sign of Anya Mittelbraun or McKayla Foster, neither of Danny or Erik Holtz. Gregory Mulgrave he did see, to his considerable consternation. Kyle also spotted a few others he recognized from around Camp Hero,

however he didn't know their names, or has since forgotten them, as they weren't his allies.

Kyle rather wondered where everyone was to be housed. And just what sort of place was this, anyway?

For the latter question, there turned out to be a short wait. A set of double doors in one wall of the parking garage opened, and a whistle blew to draw the arriving party's attentions to them. Through the double doors walked, or rather stiffly marched, a large contingent of officers, in full dress uniform. Those in the front, who also formed the majority, wore SS uniforms, while those in the back wore Air Force uniforms. The officers were led by a single SS man. He must have been over seven feet tall, his skin a striking white, his hair whitish blonde.

"Afternoon new arrivals! I am Kommandant Wolf. Welcome to Cheyenne Mountain!" the giant shouted. In spite of his SS uniform and German title, Kommandant Wolf spoke English without a trace of an accent.

"What year is it?" someone shouted.

"1953," Kommandant Wolf replied. "Now, you'll all line up into groups of 100. Each group will be distributed about the base, one by one. Understood?"

"1953," someone standing near Kyle murmured, "So much for a break from time travel."

The new arrivals began splitting off into their groups of 100, and one by one, these began to be led off into the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, hopeful but now slightly apprehensive. Kyle held firmly to Max and Harune's hands, despite their many protestations, and awaited their group to be called. The system turned out to be fairly efficient. A group would be gathered by a soldier and shown into the base, and no more than 10 minutes later, another group would be collected, and so on.

Kyle's group was about the fifth to be gathered. A young SS woman led them through the double doors. The group entered into a large concrete stairwell, going both up and down. They went down two flights and through another set of white double doors. These opened into a large room, which resembled nothing so much as an office in which one applies for a passport.

The room was tiled, and set up with row after row of multicolored chairs, like those seen in the waiting room of an airport. Along the far wall was a long row of desks with monitors and reams of paper, as well as several small boxes, each desk manned by a young lady dressed in period appropriate office wear.

The process was thus; a machine dispensing tickets stood by the door, and each asset, under the direction of whomever was escorting them, would take a ticket, which contained a number. They would then be seated in one of the rows of multicolored chairs, and wait for one of the desk girls to call their number. Their number called, the asset would go to the desk, at which point the desk girl would remove their wristbands with a special key, and then after asking a few questions, would take the asset's picture with a camera on the desk. The picture taken, the girl would then grab a card with a magnetic strip from her desk, and create a pass, by putting the card into the various boxes on her desk in turn, then at last, hand the card to the asset, and direct them to a bank of chairs identical to the first, save for it being separated by a rope. Eventually, those in this second seating area were gathered in batches, and ushered through a door in the side of the room, to somewhere further in the base.

Eventually, Kyle's number was called. What exactly it was, Kyle has since forgotten. He stood and walked in the direction of the desk, manned by a pert blonde. Kyle's type. Her tiny name-

tag read; Cynthia. Kyle held out his arm, and Cynthia, with a tiny key, removed the white wristband Kyle had been issued. This discarded, Cynthia turned to her monitor and typed while Kyle answered questions.

Cynthia: "What is your name?"

Kyle: "Kyle Dellschau."

Cynthia: "Age?"

Kyle: "I couldn't begin to tell you."

Kyle decided not to add "because I'm from a factory." Surely he couldn't be the only person here who didn't know his age? Apparently not, as Cynthia continued her questionnaire without comment.

Cynthia: "Citizenship?"

Kyle: "Der Bund Freier Deutscher Welten."

Cynthia: "Callsign?"

Kyle: "Daedalus."

Cynthia: "What is your native language?"

Kyle: "German."

Cynthia: "What is the location of your home laboratory, and who is it owned by?"

Kyle: "New Kyoto, Triton. Arasaka Robotics."

"Home laboratory," Kyle thought. What a term. But then, he reasoned, practically all of the Project Phoenix assets present had been subjected to some form of gene therapy in childhood, hadn't they?

Cynthia: "Have you any codependents?"

Kyle: "My two adoptive sons, Maximilian Bronsley and Harune Arasaka."

Cynthia: "What are your particular job enabling capabilities?"

Kyle: "I suppose you mean my enhancements? Telepathy, telekinesis, sniper's vision, and I can lift up to three tons."

Cynthia: "Right. Will you require any sort of maintenance? They don't phrase that question very well, I'm sorry."

Kyle: "Please elaborate?"

Cynthia: "Well. Do you have augments that need a particular kind of computer to run? Do you need a handler so you don't go into a dissociative state? Do you need regular drug injections or blood transfusions to maintain your gene therapy? Do you-"

Kyle: "I understand. No, I'm quite able to maintain myself in all those regards. Although if you use regeneration tanks here, you should perhaps tell your medical staff that I'm a synthetic."

Cynthia: "Yes. That's what I was looking for."

After entering this last information into her computer, Cynthia took a camera from her desk and followed the procedure, taking Kyle's picture and then imprinting both it and Kyle's information onto a white card with a magnetic strip, by inserting the card into several electronic boxes on her desk.

"Alright, Mr. Dellschau," Cynthia said at last, handing Kyle his card. "Please take a seat in that roped section."

"Thank you, Cynthia," Kyle said, accepting his card. Kyle was tempted to say much more, but restrained himself.

As their numbers were consecutive, Harune and Max were called next by Cynthia, and they soon joined Kyle and waited to be escorted further into the base. Eventually, another SS woman came to the side door of the large room, and called out for "anyone with a ticket number between 402 and 498." Kyle and the boys' tickets must have been in this range, as this is when they stood and walked to the side door and out of the registration room.

The door proved to lead to a wide white hallway. On the left was a wooden desk, behind which stood an Air Force man, handing out keys with plastic tags bearing numbers. An asset would approach the table, the Air Force man would ask how

many individuals they lived with, and then be handed one of the tagged keys, presumably for apartments. Oftentimes, small groups of children would cling together, insisting that they would find room in their assigned housing.

Kyle found himself rather looking forward to having an apartment and its associated privacy. One does get tired of living and bathing with hordes of naked men on a daily basis. The apartment for three which Kyle, Max, and Harune were assigned to was numbered 1674.

At the end of the hall was a very large elevator, which could comfortably fit the approximately 100 assets who boarded it. The elevator began to descend, though Kyle was unable to see which button the SS woman pressed.

As the elevator traveled, the SS woman began to narrate. "Welcome to Cheyenne Mountain Complex. Home to the largest stargate network in the United States. There are 37 levels of this base. All you who have come from Project Phoenix have access to parts of seven levels, for now. The 24th, the housing level, is where you will sleep and network from. The 34th is home to our armories and our shooting galleries, as well as our medical wing. The 36th and 37th are dedicated to our stargate network, from which most of your missions will depart. You will have limited access to the parking garages on our first level, and the offices on our second. You may also use our park, on the 18th level. Now, we start our orientation on the bottom."

The elevator was quite slow, opening at last into the stargate room.

"Holy shit!" Kyle and Max exclaimed in unison at the sight before them.

The room was, as ever, enormous. It was carved from solid rock, as opposed to having been built. The walls, floor, and ceiling were of flat stone, and in the center of the room stood a

monstrous circular stargate, its ring made of granite studded at regular intervals with triangular crystals of various colors. From end to end, the stargate must have been 500 feet. The gate stood on an obsidian plinth or flat-topped pyramid, raising it a further 20 feet off the ground. On the ground in front of the plinth were mounted a pair of turret railguns, their barrels at least 50 feet long, and their mounts raising them to be level with the gate.

The gate had no active portal, and so one could see the pair of hangar bay doors on the other side, which opened as Kyle and the others arrived. Inside the room beyond was a single black triangular ship, about 30 by 30 by 15 feet. Rather underwhelming after the gate, Kyle thought.

The group was then shown the 36th level, located at the top of the gate room. It seemed very underwhelming indeed, compared to below. It seemed to be mostly composed of a server farm, and a long observation hall with a single long glass window overlooking the gate room. The window, according to the SS woman, was made of a kind of transparent tungsten which could withstand anything up to a small nuclear explosion.

Next came the 34th floor. This was also underwhelming compared to the gate room, containing only a small, but adequate medical wing, with a pair of regeneration tanks, as well as an armory, which was rather limited, in comparison to the one at Camp Hero.

All throughout the orientation tour, Kyle was impressed by something. Cheyenne Mountain Complex was, in opposition to Camp Hero, efficient and smart. Every hallway was brightly lit, well signposted, spotless, and constructed in such a way as to minimize the amount of walking necessary. Nor did this place seem obscenely large. No, it was purpose-built around a single goal; harnessing the stargate.

The housing level was momentarily bypassed, as this was where the tour would end. Instead, the tour continued to the 18th level where they were shown, shockingly, an underground nature preserve. It was a perfect square, with each side about a quarter mile in length. The area was filled with the trees, bushes, and small wildlife of the Colorado Rockies. About 150 feet off the ground, a sphere of light hovered, apparently on its own power.

The normally icy seeming SS woman guiding them spoke with a smile as she explained the nature park; “This place was already here when we found the gate. It seems that whatever civilization built the gate also built this preserve. I don’t see any now, however if you wander, you’re liable to encounter some tiny robotic insects. These are who preserve the system here. Now, we must continue our tour.”

The tour ended on the 24th level, which looked more like a very large budget hotel more than something on a military base. The elevator opened onto a central atrium, and when one looked up, one could see 10 stories going up with doors overlooking the otherwise basic atrium, which had a simple floor of faux marble. A bank of elevators stood at the far end of the atrium, which the tour approached.

As they advanced, the SS woman explained something; housing would be tight. Prior to the arrival of the 1,500 Project Phoenix participants, all but perhaps 100 of the several thousand working on the stargate lived within Cheyenne Mountain Complex. Most lived on the surface, or on other bases part of “the network.” What exactly “the network” was wasn’t explained at the time. Indeed, the plan was for many Project Phoenix members to also be moved to the surface eventually. And with this, the SS woman left, allowing everyone to find their apartments.

Many of the apartments stood open, as other assets were moving in, having just been dropped off. Kyle dared not look too much into them, after the first one. He dared not hope, even now. However, Kyle's heart lifted at last when he opened the door to apartment 1675.

The apartment was decent. Not perfect. Not luxuriant. But decent. A kitchen, two small but adequate en-suite bedrooms, and a living room with a couch and recliner, as well as a television screen set into the wall, much like Kyle's apartment on Mars. While there were evidently no windows, the lights were a soft yellow, and the walls cream colored, creating an almost sunny effect.

Max and Harune, of course, immediately declared the slightly larger bedroom as theirs, and began unpacking. Seeing them, Kyle finally set down his duffle, for the first time since arriving at Cheyenne Mountain Complex, and plopped into the couch. Despite the couch was a hideous pale green, it was quite comfortable.

At the sounds of his sons boisterously setting up their room, Kyle felt tears welling up in his eyes, as he at last had something to give them. Something he'd been longing to give them; a home.

Author's note. A foundational chapter indeed, unlocking a new and important phase of Kyle's story. I apologize if, perhaps, the reader finds it less interesting than some other parts of the book.

Chapter 4

Kyle, Max, and Harune, and indeed most of the new arrivals, spent most of the next few days in limbo. On their tour, they had not been shown the upper levels, nor had they been given permission to explore. Most of the arrivals simply stayed in their apartments, or occasionally ventured to the nature park. Kyle had his glass pad, and made contact with Emmermann, who gave the order for Kyle and the boys to “sit tight,” which they did.

The only noteworthy interaction occurred about two hours after arrival. A few dozen more SS personnel showed up in the housing area, with glass pads, which they used to rapidly scan all the assets, getting their measurements. A few hours later, they returned with several changes of fatigues and boots, as well as several changes of pajamas, in the appropriate sizes of the apartment occupants.

There was some awkwardness, as the fitters didn’t bother to ask if anyone was visiting from another apartment, so some apartments had excess clothing, while others didn’t have enough, but it was sorted out within a couple of hours.

Roughly 72 hours passed before things, at last, began changing. Much like Camp Hero, Cheyenne Mountain Complex had a lights out system. An intercom announcement would go out throughout the compound, announcing lights out in 10 minutes. Cheyenne Mountain Complex was built with efficiency in mind, and it never took more than 10 minutes to get anywhere. However, there was no structured wake up, at least not for the new arrivals. At least not until the third day.

On this third day, the assets were raised by a whistle. Low and soft at first, gradually rising so that it wasn't a terribly rude awakening. It went on for perhaps three minutes, and the assets, well used to such routines already, were all standing in the hallways outside their apartments, fully clothed.

An announcement came over the intercom; "Will all assets whose surnames begin with 'A,' who did not have set jobs before their arrival, please proceed to the housing level atrium? Those needing to accompany them are welcome to do so. Everyone else may return to your housing."

This category included Harune, of course, and Kyle followed, instructing Max to find Jack and wait. Kyle gathered this was a review board, and while he trusted the SS of Cheyenne Mountain far more than those who had administered Max's review board, he didn't trust them entirely. Kyle was not the type to give up on extreme precaution.

Kyle and Harune filed out into the atrium of the housing section. They were met by Kommandant Wolf, and a small panel of personnel in labcoats. As it turned out, only three assets with surnames beginning with "A" appeared, the only ones who had no set job or known talent prior to leaving Camp Hero. The announcements calling for different letters continued until there were 12 assets, not counting the few who accompanied them. The callouts reached the letter "M" before the required number was reached.

"Splendid. Splendid." Kommandant Wolf said, looking over the assets. "Now, we must find you all jobs. Please come with me."

Kommandant Wolf and the medical staff then guided the assets and those accompanying them to the elevator and to a sublevel, the number of which has been forgotten. Here, they were tested. This review board was considerably less exhausting

than the one which Max had been subjected to, it turned out. There were breaks for rest and food, and there were few tests, compared to the Camp Hero review panels.

The design of the tests has become blurry within Kyle's memory, and in any case, I've described such procedures before. However, the assets were tested on the usual things; basic weapons prowess, languages, and a few psionic skills.

Two things unfolded. The first was that Kyle discovered he needed maintenance of some kind, as his mental responses to the language tests he overheard were slower than they should have been, and his systems registered this as needing a tune up.

The second development came from Harune's end. Far from being the intelligent, but otherwise relatively ordinary individual that his nature portrayed, Harune shot ahead in his testing. While he was clueless with weapons, Harune excelled in psionics, to a degree Kyle had never seen, and nor had the testers.

Harune turned out to be what would later come to be called a "jumper." He had the capability to teleport an object, simply through mind power. He was tested up to 100 yards, and showed no signs of struggling. Harune was also found to be a remarkable remote viewer. All in all, he was easily the top of the batch tested. Kyle led him from the testing level rather shellshocked, but also delighted. Being so rare would ensure good treatment for Harune, Kyle imagined.

Back at the apartment, Kyle sat Harune down and faced him.

Kyle: "Little Boy Blue, where did you learn to do those things?"

Harune: "I... don't really know. I just do them."

Kyle: "But someone must have taught you. Didn't they?"

Harune: "I don't know. I can't remember things sometimes."

Max: "His mind is fractured, Dad."

Kyle paused, thinking. He knew something of the concept, of course. He'd heard a few whispers of people at Camp Hero who went into altered states and would have greater capabilities afterwards. But Kyle hadn't imagined that Harune could fall into this category. Just how badly had Harune been abused before coming to Earth, anyway?

Kyle shuddered, then leaned forward on the couch and drew Harune close.

Kyle: "I'm sorry. What happened to you... well, it won't happen again. I love you Harune."

Harune reciprocated the hug, seemingly not totally understanding what was going on. To him, his abilities were some mysterious thing he never questioned.

Kyle: "Kid, you've gotta never hide anything like that from me again. You understand?"

Harune: "I'm sorry, Kyle."

"Please, don't apologize," Kyle said, pained at Harune's beseeching tone. "Just don't do it again. I need to know things to protect you. Now, I have to go see your uncle Yoshiro."

After his conversation with Harune, Kyle left the boys at the apartment, then went to find Tsurabaya to inform him of his system failure. Kyle knew Tsurabaya was still an employee of Arasaka Robotics, thus the person most likely to be able to assist.

Kyle found Tsurabaya in short order, in one of the apartments. He was sharing it with about five children, all Japanese monolingual speakers, and therefore in need of him as an interpreter. Kyle knocked on the apartment door, and Tsurabaya called him in. So relaxed and relieved were the new arrivals at Cheyenne Mountain Complex, that they now no longer locked their doors, except at night. And so Kyle entered, finding

Tsurabaya seated on a couch identical to the one in his own apartment, while the children he oversaw ran about.

“Kyle! Wasn’t expecting company, but come sit down. I’ll get you a beer,” Tsurabaya said cheerfully, standing from the couch.

“Thanks, but I can’t stay long, I’m afraid” Kyle said, entering and sitting on the couch, smiling.

Tsurabaya returned with two beers, and Kyle decided not to ask where they had come from. They certainly hadn’t been officially issued.

Kyle: “Gods. Everything is so calm. I never thought this day would come. Now, the reason I came; I’m having technical issues. I think I need maintenance.”

Tsurabaya: “Holy shit. Is it serious?”

Kyle: “No. At least I don’t think so. But today I found myself forgetting words.”

Tsurabaya: “Yes, I see. You need an upgrade on your language chip. I’ll make the call, and someone will pick us up. I imagine we’ll have to go to Triton.”

Kyle paused, then switched to English for his next part of the conversation. He didn’t want the children in the apartment who might overhear him to understand his next words.

Kyle: “There’s something else. And I’ll just say it; I’m tired of my penis groaning like an animal. It’s so humiliating. You can barely hear it, but it’s there, any time I get hard. Is there anything that can be done? I wouldn’t ask, except that we’re going in anyway.”

Tsurabaya: “Yes. That sounds embarrassing.”

Tsurabaya had to pause for a few seconds to suppress laughter before continuing.

Tsurabaya: “I think that should be simple to solve. The sexual functions of synthetics are purely muscular and nerve conduction related anyway, we now understand. The motor you’re

hearing is superfluous. I'll put in an order to have it removed. Sorry you had that issue."

Kyle: "You 'now understand' that? Your company has no fucking clue about how their own products work, do they?"

Tsurabaya: "It's not 'my' company, my friend. But as a rule, yes. We take these bodies, design them, and learn as we go. Your beer is getting warm."

Kyle paused, then drank his beer, chatting as he normally would with Tsurabaya. Kyle wasn't the type to bite a friend's head off for no reason, and Tsurabaya hadn't given a reason, really. He was a slave also, just of a different power. His drink finished, Kyle left, noticing as he closed the apartment door that Tsurabaya was already grabbing his glass pad and sending some variety of message. Kyle returned to his apartment, to find Harune showing off his capabilities to Max, using one of the comic books the boys had brought from Camp Hero. Kyle smiled at this scene, and so settled into the evening.

Evenings at Cheyenne Mountain, for Kyle and family, were typically thus; first Kyle and the boys would watch television for a time (typically no more than an hour, unless there was a movie; house rules), then their evening meal would come. The evening meals were delivered by what looked like a normal multilayered dinner cart, as one might find in a hospital. However, the cart was robotic, and would stop automatically in front of each door. It gave off a low, siren-like alarm, which alerted all to its presence, and it would stop in each hallway for perhaps 30 seconds, allowing all the apartments in each hallway to come get their meals.

The meals were typical American fare; pancakes, burgers, Salisbury Steak, and so on. These had likely come from replicators, however these were clearly higher quality than those Kyle

had encountered on Mars, and likely used a substance other than human waste.

After the meal, Kyle and the boys would usually play a game of some kind. Before leaving Project Phoenix, one of the boys' friends had given them a deck of cards. In their boredom, they'd become quite proficient at inventing new card games. After a while, the lights would dim, which meant bedtime. Kyle now looks back on those evenings as the best time of his life. He didn't even feel the need to have sex, though he was looking forward to doing so once his "issue" was fixed.

The next morning, the lights came back on, the whistles blew again, and everyone filled into the halls. The announcement was for assets to come to the entry of the housing sector, this time starting with the letter "M." Another announcement also went out.

"All other assets, please standby. You will be receiving your assignments soon, delivered to your apartments."

And so everyone retreated to their rooms. Soon, officers came through the halls, knocking on doors and handing out assignments, in alphabetical order. First in Kyle's group was, of course, Harune, who struggled to read the English paper he received, and so handed it to Kyle.

"Well well," Kyle said, relieved. "You're to be a navigator. You get to fly ships. With me, in fact. It specifies that you're staying with me."

Next in the apartment to receive an assignment was Max, as he bore the surname of Bronsley. He was being assigned an espionage in training position, much the same as he'd had at Camp Hero, and Kyle supposed Max's file must have been sent.

Kyle's assignment was last to arrive, and was the most surprising. Kyle's assignment was, quite simply, nothing. He was, due to his "versatility" (the word used in the assignment

sheet) to simply stand by and receive and follow orders as they came. No title was to be given, nor was Kyle to be assigned to any specific sector. The most permanent matter being assigned was the ship Kyle was to be flown on; the Edelweiss, whose captain was David Steinel, who was also to train Harune as a navigator.

One rather uplifting thing was included in Kyle's assignment; official recognition of Max and Harune as Kyle's "codependents" as the assignment sheet said, with Kyle listed as "guardian."

Kyle's starting date was listed as "pending extenuating circumstances." Apparently, Tsurabaya's report had reached the authorities of Cheyenne Mountain Complex quite quickly. The boys, however, were to start the next day. This was the new arrivals' last day off. Work was now to begin, as it must.

It was within the next few hours that Tsurabaya showed up at Kyle's apartment. Far be it from Tsurabaya (or Arasaka Robotics, for that matter) to waste time.

"You should get some underwear and a change of clothes," Tsurabaya said. "It'll be an overnight trip at least."

Kyle nodded, then went to his room and quickly gathered the few necessities, throwing them in a small rucksack, then gave instructions to Max and Harune that they were to find the Flynns and stay with them, until he returned. And with this, Kyle and Tsurabaya left.

"We headed for the gate?" Kyle asked. He was eager to see the giant stargate in action.

"No. We drive through one of the smaller gates, on the level we arrived at. After that, there's a ship to pick us up." Tsurabaya then added; "They've given us a jeep."

Kyle and Tsurabaya walked to the elevator, which to Kyle's surprise, ascended rather than descended to the level they had first arrived. Tsurabaya explained that the jeeps and other

“normal” vehicles were kept parked on the second sublevel of Cheyenne Mountain Complex. The elevator exited directly into the vehicle bay, which looked much the same as the one below, only rather than housing an array of off-world vehicles, this one housed more terrestrial ones. Tanks, trucks, and jeeps. Beside the door to the elevator stood a desk, with a young man scanning the cards of those arriving, handing them keys and directing them to the vehicles they’d been assigned to. With the new arrivals starting work the next day, many were exploring the facility, and so the area was abuzz with activity.

The key to the jeep that Kyle and Tsurabaya were handed was on a ring with a red tag bearing a number. The man handing it out mentioned that the number on the tag was also painted on the driver’s door of the vehicle. And so Kyle and Tsurabaya went to their jeep, whose number has been lost to history.

Kyle and Tsurabaya loaded in, with Tsurabaya driving. Kyle noticed that the jeep gave off no exhaust fumes, so even though it was, on the outside, a period appropriate jeep, its engine had been swapped for a smaller version of one found in crafts.

Tsurabaya started the jeep and set off to one of the openings in the walls of the parking garage, this one leading into a downward sloping concrete tunnel. The slope eventually began to curve, and continued to do so, in a long, winding, corkscrew fashion, descending into the Earth. The curve was quite tight, and the tunnel narrow, making it difficult to not scrape the sides with the jeep, but Tsurabaya managed, and at last the tunnel ended, emerging into the underground vehicle bay with the portal network which the arrivals from Camp Hero had first pulled into.

Tsurabaya began counting the portals in the walls of the vehicle bay, apparently having been told a specific one to drive through. Upon seemingly finding it, he set towards it, and drove

through. This portal, it turned out, exited onto the surface of an exoplanet that Kyle did not recognize. The sky was a slightly darker blue than Earth's, and a very large moon, covered in a desert, hung in the sky, being lit by a red sun. The jeep bearing Kyle and Tsurabaya drove onto the top of a plateau, which was grassy on top, and heightened to the extent that the vista below couldn't be clearly seen.

"Where are we?" Kyle asked in bewilderment. Why had they been sent here, of all places?

"I have no fucking clue," Tsurabaya said with a chuckle.

Whatever the case, they weren't going to find out what or where their destination was, nor why they'd been sent there. Within moments of Kyle and Tsurabaya's arrival, a ship appeared on the horizon. It was of the same shipping container-like design as Emmermann's usual transport ships, but much larger. The vessel lowered in front of the jeep, its backdoor opened, and Tsurabaya drove in. The door of then closed, and the ship lifted. There were no windows, so Kyle didn't bother to exit the jeep. The ship, as usual, "jumped," and was on location in a few minutes. The backdoor reopened, and Tsurabaya backed the jeep outside.

They emerged, it turned out, into the exact shuttle bay from which Kyle had first left the Arasaka plant on Triton, in early 1985, after being purchased by Emmermann. Kyle shuddered. He hadn't forgotten his days in the padded room, and the psychological tortures applied to him there. But now he was a guest, of course, and the small party of perhaps four approaching the jeep wore medical outfits. Not a cattle prod in sight.

The party was led by Dr. Noriko Tarakada, Kyle's designer, and the woman who had first applied the synthetic test to him in the padded room. Kyle and Tsurabaya alighted, and the party reached them, glass pads in hand.

Dr. Tarakada: “Kyle! One of my finest creations! I hear you’re having a few issues?”

Kyle resisted his urge to react with rage, and simply bowed in the Japanese way, then held out his hand.

“Yes. I’m having an issue with my language chip, and a..... bodily issue I’d prefer to discuss in private,” Kyle said, in as cordial a tone as he could muster.

“Yes. It’s all in this report that was submitted,” Dr. Tarakada replied. “The bodily issue is the more complicated one, and not my area.”

Dr. Tarakada turned to one of her colleagues, all of whom were male, and addressed the one with blue eyes, which were clearly synthetic installments.

“Dr. Yamazaki, you do genitalia; will you please escort my creation to the appropriate laboratory?” Dr. Tarakada asked, addressing the blue-eyed doctor.

“Of course. Please come with me, Mr. Dellschau,” Dr. Yamazaki said, and began to walk towards one of the doorways branching off the shuttle bay. With a shrug, Kyle followed, with Tsurabaya calling out that he’d see Kyle later.

As Kyle and Dr. Yamazaki walked through the doorway, Kyle had a sudden thought.

“Dr. Yamazaki; would it be possible to have a tour of the plant?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t see why not. But whatever for?” Dr. Yamazaki asked. “Your file said you were a soldier unit, not a science model.”

Kyle shrugged.

“I suppose synthetics like myself are prone to wish to know our origins.” Kyle said thoughtfully.

Dr. Yamazaki turned to look at Kyle, blinked several times, then shrugged and turned back to the hallway, continuing to walk, visibly slightly shaken by Kyle’s show of initiative. He led

Kyle a long distance to a particular door labeled “observation hallway,” in a white plaque in its center. Dr. Yamazaki opened it, and beckoned Kyle through.

The hallway itself was as one would expect; long, one wall of which was entirely glass. It was the sight it overlooked which was remarkable.

The hall looked over a warehouse sized room in which, from floor to ceiling, wound numerous rails. Not rails of the type on which one places a train. Rather, these were the industrial rails of the type one sees in factories, from which things are hung and conveyed along to their next stage of production. From these rails hung glass tubes, each about 10 feet in height by perhaps four feet in diameter. Each tube was filled with two things; a glowing translucent fluid of pale blue, and a naked, unconscious human body.

These bodies were of any description; all races and age groups were represented, as well as apparent fitness levels. Kyle also saw one tube which contained a fish woman. However, while all were represented, not all were common. The individuals in the tubes slanted heavily towards men and women between the apparent ages of 17 and 45, and most either had soldierly physiques or small, petite frames. The rails all ended at a conveyor belt, and every so often, one of the tubes would be deposited on the belt, which went to somewhere as yet not visible.

“Holy shit!” Kyle exclaimed at the sight, then shuddered; “Was I brought into your facility like this?”

“Yes, I suppose you must have been,” Dr. Yamazaki said. “Shall we continue?”

Kyle nodded, and Dr. Yamazaki led Kyle to the far end of the observation hallway, where an elevator with black doors stood. Kyle and the doctor boarded it, which then descended to, by

Kyle's calculation, the floor of the room bearing the bodies in tubes, though it couldn't be seen, as Kyle and Dr. Yamazaki emerged into a blank hallway. The doctor escorted Kyle along, through several twists and turns, until at last reaching another hallway altogether.

While the earlier hallways had been white and carpeted, this one had a smooth black floor, and walls decorated with chrome art. The doors which lined it were also black, and had windows to view inside the rooms. The rooms bore white plaques, each one having a single word printed in a slew of languages.

"The laboratories. Well, most of them. The brains, blood, and chips are made downstairs," Dr. Yamazaki explained. "Would you like to see them?"

"Yes," Kyle said, overcome with a mixture of fascination and disgust.

With a nod, Dr. Yamazaki opened the door to the first of these so-called laboratories, this one labeled "preparations." This room was also warehouse sized.

At the back was the conveyor belt which came from the room with the bodies. At the side of the room was a staircase going upward, to an office with a glass front, from which one could observe the "preparations" room. A few human personnel in scrubs walked to and fro observing the various processes.

The conveyor belt would arrive, carrying the tubes with the bodies, and pause for a few seconds, while a hydraulic arm with a claw would lower onto each tube and first rapidly unscrew the lid, lift out each body, then move them into the room for the "preparation" process.

The process was thus; first, the body, held by the claw, would be rapidly scanned by a laser grid, from head to toe, then lowered onto another conveyor belt, which snaked around the room, stopping at various intervals, where the body could be

acted upon by various more hydraulic arms, which came both from the ceiling and from the sides of the conveyor belt.

After being lowered onto the belt, the bodies would first be handled by two hydraulic arms. One would open the mouth, and another would reach into the mouth and, Kyle supposed, tattoo the person's serial number. After this, the body would be moved to another station, where several hydraulic arms with large needles would insert themselves into the body and, in a matter of seconds, exsanguinate the body fully, the blood then pumping through tubes which went into the floor, to the blood department, Kyle supposed.

After exsanguination, the body would be carried to be positioned under a laser guillotine, which would cleanly slice off the top of the head, perhaps an inch above the eyes. The removed skullcap would be taken off, and delicately placed on the stomach of the body, via a claw. Another claw, this one descending from the ceiling, would come and remove the brain, stem and all, and lower it into an opening in the ground. To the brain department, most likely.

Lastly, the body would momentarily be lifted again by yet another claw, and several hydraulic arms with small plasma blades would make a few deep cuts on the body, on the neck, arms, back, torso, and legs. This done, the body would be deposited back on the conveyor belt from which it had first entered the laboratory, with the tubes of blue fluid having been conveyed along, as had their severed skullcap, which a claw removed to somewhere unseen while the body was lifted. The "preparation" took place over far less time than it takes to write about. Each body was in the room for no more than 30 seconds, and the instant one body left a station, another would take its place.

Each of the remaining laboratories, or as Kyle rather saw them, factories, was dedicated to a specific part of the body. Muscles, hearts, skeletons, eyes, gonads, teeth, skin, etcetera. Each batch of bodies would be brought in on the conveyor belt, lifted off, then placed on another conveyor belt through the room. Here, the bodies would once again be operated upon by hydraulic arms with whatever instruments were necessary, which would supplant the relevant body parts with synthetic replacements.

The process which took the longest, and was for Kyle the most difficult to watch, was the skin and nails room. First, all the nails were removed. Then, the body was held up in the center of the room on a frame, and an army of hydraulic arms would skin the body completely. Then, only the nails would be replaced before the body was moved to the next room, with no skin. The skinning process was quite lengthy, taking nearly a minute per body.

The room directly succeeding the skinning room, in which the muscles and skeleton were replaced, was also quite graphic. A muscle would be removed, then a bone, which would rapidly be replaced by the synthetic versions. The internal organs were altogether removed and replaced with pure synthetic muscles, (the “blood vessels” already inlaid) save for a single set of flexible, pink tubing and bag which took the place of the esophagus, intestines, and bladder. The chest cavity was left open for, Dr. Yamazaki explained, the installation of the “heart,” which took place in the very next room.

“Basement universe” technology was obviously at play here. The hallway through which each factory was accessed was the same size as any hallway in a standard office space, with no door more than about 10 feet from the last one. Nowhere near

enough space, externally, for the warehouse-sized rooms which the factories were fitted in.

All the removed organs, skin, bones, and so on, were deposited in holes in the floors. Kyle imagined that these were sold off for their genetic material, or used to grow clones.

After the “heart” installation came a room labeled as “genitalia/gonads.” This was the penultimate room, the final one being where eyes were installed and the skin replaced, at which point the bodies were moved downstairs to the blood, brain, and chip departments.

“This is my area,” Dr. Yamazaki said of the “genitalia/gonads” room, speaking with a pride that contained no trace of irony, and after opening the door to this department, Dr. Yamazaki showed Kyle to the office which overlooked it. All the departments had one of these offices, which Kyle supposed were occupied by a doctor who oversaw them.

In Dr. Yamazaki’s office, Kyle was asked a series of questions about his genitalia and the issues he perceived with them. Dr. Yamazaki was very clinical about it all of course, it was his work, and Kyle was a bit too spiritually nauseated by all he’d seen to be able to make any dirty jokes. At the end, Dr. Yamazaki did an examination, then produced a pornographic magazine, and asked Kyle to masturbate to orgasm, while Dr. Yamazaki watched, though he was gracious enough to stay silent as he made notes. Kyle compartmentalized and managed it. He saw it was necessary to solve his issue.

After this was finished, Dr. Yamazaki led Kyle to a room off his office. This turned out to be a private surgery, with a bed. From somewhere, Dr. Yamazaki produced an injection gun. This served to dull Kyle’s “nerves” throughout his body, and although he was conscious, his muscles were made gelatinous, so he couldn’t lift his head to see the surgery, not that he wished to. It

took perhaps two minutes, and then around 10 minutes to recover enough muscular control to stand and walk again. Dr. Yamazaki explained that the tiny motor which made the slight mechanical sound Kyle hated so much had been removed, and Kyle was now sexually indistinguishable from a biological man, though still infertile. This made Kyle happy, despite the slightly humiliating process of getting this result. He had some post-surgical pain, which Dr. Yamazaki assured Kyle would go away, as Kyle would be getting a dip in the regeneration tank once Dr. Tarakada's work was done.

The genital work completed, Kyle got to see the final room of the upper levels, this being the room where eyes and skins were added to bodies, still minus the skullcaps. This room was again a bit horrifying to witness, as the synthetic skins were applied in pieces, and the pieces put together on the body sometimes by being stitched, and sometimes by being cauterized on by a laser. The eyes were also sewn shut after being applied, leaving the bodies looking rather like life-sized voodoo dolls with the tops of their heads missing. When this process was complete, the bodies were placed back on the main conveyor belt once more, to travel a level down for the finishing touches. Dr. Yamazaki led Kyle down a stairwell to this lower level.

This floor looked much the same as the one above, though with fewer doors. Dr. Yamazaki turned Kyle to the first of these, labeled "brains," which Dr. Yamazaki said was Dr. Tarakada's department. This room proved even larger than the others, as it had three conveyor systems running. One third of the room was a conveyor belt carrying the bodies, as usual. The second one had the skullcaps, or rather the synthetic replacements. And the third one had the brains.

The brains were the ones being acted upon the most. As they were conveyed along, they were being very delicately, but

extremely rapidly fitted with chips. Chips so small, that they were difficult to see until one stood right next to the machines. The chips were inserted by wire-thin sets of tweezers, and each chip had a wire coming out of it, a little less than the thickness of a human hair, at the end of which was a tiny gold plug or connector. These wires were left hanging out of the brain, and at the end of the conveyor belt, another few pairs of these wire-thin tweezers would rapidly connect all these wires at the tiny gold plugs, quite tightly, so that the brain was now seemingly trussed in a nearly invisible net of minuscule wires.

Once the brain was trussed, the three conveyor belts converged. The bodies were lifted up and held in quasi standing positions by hydraulic arms. Another arm would delicately insert the brain, a third arm with more of the thin tweezers would go into the head and, Kyle supposed, quickly spliced together a few necessary connections between brain and body, and then finally, the artificial skullcaps and hair were placed on top. The head was then targeted by a very hot laser which served to both weld the artificial “bone” material, affixing the skullcap permanently, as well as cauterizing the “skin” together. The trussing of the brain was plainly necessary once one saw this process and could clearly observe that these artificial skulls were quite a bit thicker than those of a biological human.

After the welding of the head back together, the bodies were deposited back on the main conveyor belt, to be taken to the last part of their creation; the blood department, or sanguinary. Here, they would be pumped with a certain amount of “Blood Two,” the same artificial blood substitute of nanites and chemicals which ran through Kyle’s veins. This would also start the heart of the synthetic, and afterwards, they’d be given a quick dip in a regeneration tank, to heal the innumerable scars on their bodies, before being transferred into vats filled with the

same blue stasis fluid as had filled the tubes they had originally left, and in these vats, their chips would slowly come online, allowing them to gradually wake up. By the end, the synthetics' only biological parts were their brain, now controlled by chips, their hair, and, Kyle supposed, the flesh on the roofs of their mouths which bore their serial numbers.

Kyle had stood watching this process for several minutes when Dr. Tarakada approached.

"Quite impressive, isn't she?" Dr. Tarakada said, beaming and taking in the production line in the way one takes in the sight of a child's accomplishments.

"I suppose you could put it that way," Kyle said. "Now, may we fix my chip?"

"Yes. Right this way. Yamazaki, thank you," Dr. Tarakada said, and at this, Dr. Yamazaki bowed and left. Dr. Tarakada took Kyle's hand and showed him to her office, which again overlooked the production line in the "brains" section. Once inside, Dr. Tarakada sat behind her sleek white desk, and Kyle sat opposite.

"Right," Dr. Tarakada said, picking up her glass pad from her desk. "You may recall that soon after your creation, I administered a test of personality and language?"

"You mean when I was locked in the padded room? Yes, I remember that," Kyle said in an irritated tone, not matching the cheerful one Dr. Tarakada had adopted.

"Well. I'm going to administer that test again, timing your responses when I switch languages. If there's a delay, or any stumbling or grammatical errors, I'll know there's definitely an issue with your language chip. Ready?" Dr. Tarakada asked.

"Ready," Kyle said with a shrug.

The test was administered. For the test, the reader may consult the third chapter of the second volume, as Kyle made an

effort to give the same answers verbatim as he had before. He knew these answers made Dr. Tarakada and Arasaka Robotics squirm, which Kyle took an almost sadistic joy in seeing. While Kyle managed the test, his responses were quite delayed.

“Right,” Dr. Tarakada said after the test ended. “I’m going to replace your chip. I trust you remember Dr. Yamazaki’s surgery? You’ll be in mine now. I will need you to put on a gown, however. You’ll be going in the tank once you’re done. Relieve that soreness in your crotch you’re so valiantly trying not to rub in public.”

Kyle shrugged, then decided to ask a question that had been bothering him slightly.

Kyle: “Doctor; what of the... thoughts? The programming? You create us with our full brains stored in our heads, yet we have all this programming, and can’t hardly think for ourselves. How?”

Dr. Tarakada: “You are quite something, Kyle. I’ve never seen one of you ask those types of questions. I suppose I can show you the answer.”

Dr. Tarakada opened a drawer on her desk and pulled out a small plastic box, which she opened, and pulled out a tiny object. A cylinder about an inch and a half long and perhaps an eighth of an inch wide, made of what appeared at first glance to be gray plastic. Dr. Tarakada handed it to Kyle.

Dr. Tarakada: “This is a reject I keep for demonstration.”

Kyle’s first action, as it happened, was to try and break the thing, holding it between his thumb and forefinger and squeezing. With Kyle’s hyper enhanced strength, anything made of standard plastic would have instantly shattered like it was nothing. This little cylinder didn’t so much as crack, or flex in the least. Kyle looked up at Dr. Tarakada, impressed.

Kyle: “Alright. What is this?”

Dr. Tarakada: "That's the place where your thoughts come from, Kyle. The center of the neural net contained in the chips. The tissue in the brain is just.... a vessel. A chip like that one you hold is your consciousness. We call it a "soul byte." You understand?"

Kyle: "I'm beginning to. But how is each "soul byte" programmed with a personality? Each one contains its own artificial intelligence?"

Dr. Tarakada: "That is a gross oversimplification. But yes. A digital consciousness, made not with binary code, but with an eight digit code from eight characters in the Draconian alphabet. Most are made by our computers, which is how we mass produce."

Kyle: "But not all?"

Dr. Tarakada: "Very astute. No, not all. Yours, for instance, was programmed and coded, at least at the base level, by hand. By me. Half of you is the standard programming for science and espionage models. But the rest of you? Your taste in music, your taste in food, your questioning of everything? That's all me. It was an experiment, and it paid off."

There was a moment of silence.

Dr. Tarakada: "I can see by the look on your face that you don't like the idea."

Kyle: "It's not that precisely. I suppose I just wonder what makes you think you have the right."

Dr. Tarakada threw her head back in hearty laughter at this.

Dr. Tarakada: "Well Kyle. I don't think I can answer that. I do these things because my job and my nature want me too. Now, how about we fix that language chip?"

Kyle: "One last thing; what are these "soul bytes" made of?"

Dr. Tarakada: "Ah yes. The inside is a combination of tiny gold and copper wires, tiny crystal pieces, and silicon. Typical of

advanced computers. The outside is an indestructible element mined in the rim. It's called Miracalium. Harder than diamonds, but when it's polished, it looks and feels like plastic. Just about completely indestructible."

Kyle paused, then shrugged. There wasn't much he could do now, so he stood and walked toward Dr. Tarakada's surgery room, and Dr. Tarakada followed. Kyle entered, finding that the surgery was essentially the same as Dr. Yamazaki's had been, though somewhat larger. A hospital gown sat on the bed, and Kyle dutifully stripped and slipped on the gown. Dr. Tarakada was gracious enough to turn her back during this process, opening a drawer in the countertop with a sink which jutted from one wall, and pulling out the injection gun which delivered the agent that rendered Kyle's nerves useless. Dr. Tarakada helped Kyle lay face-first on the bed, and the surgery began.

Kyle had full awareness, albeit no feeling in his muscles, for several minutes. He was aware of a slight warmth at the back of his head, which was the laser cutter of the surgical unit cutting in. He was also aware of the surgery room door opening and closing, which Dr. Tarakada said was the replacement chip being delivered.

"Right" Dr. Tarakada said. "The old chip is being removed now. You will lose your language comprehension, and then there'll be a system reboot once the new chip is installed. You'll wake up again in a stasis vat, your systems restored."

And just a few moments later, it came to be. Kyle was vaguely aware, as something was pulled from his brain, and most of his systems went offline. He had only the vaguest possible sensations a few minutes later, as a few pairs of hands lifted him from Dr. Tarakada's personal surgery chair. They placed him on a hovering stretcher, then pulled the stretcher downstairs from Dr. Tarakada's office, through the "brains" lab, down a hallway,

then hoisted him onto a metal frame to be placed in a regeneration tank. Afterwards, Kyle was at last bathed in the peaceful, irresistible sleepiness which envelopes all who enter a regeneration tank, and Kyle knew nothing.

Kyle was awoken, uncertain how much later, by the sound of music, and a blissful, relaxed feeling, his entire body bathed in warmth, and only the slightest sense of touch. He didn't know where he was, nor did he feel very motivated to find out and risk upending his momentary bliss, as an angelic voice from an unseen corner sang the following song.

Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down, and still somehow
Its clouds illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and Ferris Wheels
That dizzy dancing way you feel
As every fairy tale comes real
I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show

You leave 'em laughing when you go
And if you care, don't let them know
Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now
From give and take, and still somehow
It's love's illusions I recall
I really don't know love at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud
To say "I love you" right out loud
Dreams and schemes and circus crowds
I've looked at life that way

But now old friends are acting strange
They shake their heads, they say I've changed
Well, something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose, and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose, and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all
I really don't know life at all

As the song neared the end, Kyle's awareness began returning more and more, and as his sensory perception increased, he

became slightly aware that he was bathed in liquid. His arm jerked involuntarily, and so Kyle, his brain addled by the stasis fluid, experienced a moment of panic, jerking straight up into a sitting position, looking around in panic.

“Where? What the fuck?” Kyle sputtered, slipping fully into his native Silesian German for a moment as his eyes darted around, not yet able to take in the scene before him.

“Easy! Easy. You’re fine. It’s just stasis brain,” a voice at Kyle’s left side said.

It was Tsurabaya’s voice, who was standing beside Kyle and the vat he sat in. Tsurabaya reached out slowly and placed a hand on Kyle’s left shoulder, giving Kyle his first solid sensation since awakening.

Kyle turned his head and took in the sight of his old friend. He was overcome, for perhaps 10 seconds, with an unexplained yet totally irrepressible urge to bawl and wail as he likely never had, followed just as abruptly by an equally irresistible urge to laugh loudly and maniacally. For both of these bouts, Kyle had his eyes clamped shut, and when they at last opened, real lucidity finally returned, and Kyle once again faced Tsurabaya.

“Holy shit,” Kyle said, “what the fuck was that about?”

Tsurabaya laughed heartily.

“That, my friend, was what they call stasis brain. It’s pretty rough, especially your first time.” Tsurabaya explained.

“How long was I out for?” Kyle asked.

“Oh, about 14 hours,” Tsurabaya said with a glance at his watch. “I picked that song you heard, by the way. Waking up is better when you’re eased back to the land of the living by beautiful music.”

“How did you know the song to use? It was perfect.” Kyle inquired, and Tsurabaya laughed again.

“I think I know you pretty well, Kyle. Now, can you feel your legs?” Tsurabaya asked.

“I... guess so,” Kyle said, his senses still not fully returned.

“Right. Let’s get you cleaned up and dressed. There’s a room at the side of this one with a hose and such, and I think I left your overnight bag there.” Tsurabaya advised, then placed his arm under Kyle’s and helped him slowly out of the vat and to his feet.

Kyle was unstable at first, and thus required Tsurabaya’s help to hobble, naked, to one end of the ocean of vats which, upon looking around, Kyle realized with a shudder was the same one he had first awoken in on Christmas Eve of 1983. However, he and Tsurabaya went through a different door this time, this one larger and labeled as “cleaning.”

The room bore a striking and unnerving similarity to the cleaning room at Camp Hero, described in the eighth chapter of the previous volume, being that it was a large room with a concrete floor which slanted ever so slightly towards a single drain in the center of the room. One entire wall was a single long mirror, in front of which was a single long bench.

Along the opposite wall from the bench and mirror was one long metal railing, which Kyle leaned on, and Tsurabaya grabbed one of the two hoses which stood by the door. This hose, which was blue, shot a jet of water, which was mercifully warm, and Tsurabaya used this to wash the glycerin-like stasis fluid off Kyle.

The jet of water returned the last of Kyle’s senses, and as it washed over him, his bodily systems apparently decided to join in, as muscles all throughout Kyle’s torso and head tightened, forcing all fluid out of his body uncontrollably via his mouth, ears, and his pseudo urinary tract, expelling all fluid in about three seconds. Tsurabaya was gracious enough to not comment,

and then quickly gave a now self-supporting Kyle a quick once-over with the room's second hose, this one shooting a jet of air which almost instantly dried Kyle.

At last, Kyle walked to the mirror, and looked at himself. He looked intact. His body hadn't outwardly been changed at all. Also sitting on the bench was his overnight duffle bag, which he started to open, when he had an idea and turned to Tsurabaya.

"Any chance of a few minutes of privacy?" Kyle asked, hoping Tsurabaya wouldn't ask why.

Tsurabaya immediately guessed it, or perhaps did some light telepathy.

"You mean you want to see if your new dick works? Be my guest, I'll step out. Come out when you're dressed," Tsurabaya said bluntly, then exited the room, guffawing to himself.

Kyle rolled his eyes. However, Tsurabaya had been correct. Kyle, after a moment of laughing, did indeed test himself, and found that he was indeed still fully sexually functional. The motor which made the embarrassing sound had been entirely superfluous, and now that it was gone, Kyle was able to feel more human. His experiment done, Kyle dressed in the clothes he'd brought in his duffle bag, and summarily exited the "cleaning" room, back to the ocean of vats.

"Right. We have to go get you checked out, then we can go home," Tsurabaya said. Accordingly, he and Kyle turned and walked through the door Kyle had first walked through in '83, into the same reception area where Kyle had received his first taste of the cattle prod. Now, the receptionist simply gestured for him and Tsurabaya to have a seat.

They had initially arrived on Triton quite late, and it was now the wee hours of the morning, and Kyle was being required to see the Doctors Tarakada and Yamazaki again. And so Kyle and

Tsurabaya had to wait for hours, with only the young receptionist to keep them company, who wasn't very chatty. So, Kyle and Tsurabaya shot the breeze, and fiddled with this and that, Tsurabaya even giving Kyle a few language exercises, until at last Doctors Tarakada and Yamazaki arrived.

First to speak with Kyle, after the usual greetings, was Dr. Tarakada, who, using some sort of voice-to-text translation program on her glass pad, had a generic conversation with Kyle in multiple languages, instructing Kyle to randomly switch languages at whatever intervals he chose. Dr. Tarakada's glass pad would translate what Kyle said to Japanese text for her, and would also suggest a response she might give, this response being in Kyle's chosen language. The conversation was evidently rather boring and stilted, and Kyle was relieved when it ended, with Dr. Tarakada saying Kyle had passed very well. His language chip replacement had been very successful, she declared.

Next to speak was Dr. Yamazaki, who once again asked Kyle a number of rather invasive questions about his genitalia, but before he could ask Kyle to prove his potency, Kyle firmly and decisively assured Dr. Yamazaki that he'd already done so, and testing was unnecessary. Kyle was not in the mood to self-stimulate in front of a doctor twice in 24 hours.

"Right," Tsurabaya said as soon as the doctors had concluded, "can we leave?"

"Yes," Dr. Tarakada said, tapping a few things on her glass pad. Then, turning the tablet to Tsurabaya; "sign here please."

With his finger, Tsurabaya signed what must have been Kyle's release form. Kyle himself was not given anything to sign.

"Because I'm not a person, I'm a piece of equipment which has just been serviced," Kyle reflected ruefully.

The glass pad signed, the receptionist pointed to one of several doors leading away from the waiting room. Kyle was fairly sure this was not the one from which he'd first been carted through to the padded room back in '83. Whatever the case, beyond it lay a short hallway, where Tsurabaya led Kyle down to an elevator, which they entered. It ascended directly into the shuttle and vehicle bay from which Kyle had first left the facility after his creation, where the jeep and shuttle which he and Tsurabaya had arrived in were parked.

Kyle was slowly piecing together the architecture of the facility. It was actually quite small, he was realizing, despite the amount of people awaiting syntheticization that he had seen. Kyle shuddered a bit at the capabilities and turnout of the larger facilities that Arasaka Robotics was bound to have.

Kyle and Tsurabaya loaded onto their jeep, and drove it into a shuttle identical to the one which had brought them to Triton. As the backdoor of the shuttle began closing, Kyle had an idea and leapt from the jeep.

"Excuse me," Kyle said, addressing the ship's pilot or AI, "is it possible to do a flyby of Triton before we jump?"

"I believe so, Herr Dellschau," the pilot or AI (Kyle still didn't know which flew these types of shuttles) replied.

"Thank you," Kyle added, flipping up one of the shuttle's "window" slats.

"What's this all about?" Tsurabaya asked curiously, having come and stood next to Kyle at the "window."

"I realized that Triton is my home planet. I thought I may as well see it," Kyle said, and the ship began to lift, flying out of the shuttle bay and into the orbit of Triton.

Kyle was rather disappointed in what he saw, though he wasn't sure what he'd expected. Only two buildings stood on the surface of Triton. One was a large white block which towered

beneath a force field, clearly the Arasaka facility. The other was a glass dome perhaps 10 miles in diameter.

“Port Fujimori,” Tsurabaya explained. “The spaceport for New Kyoto.”

“And where is New Kyoto?” Kyle asked.

“Underground. I’ll see about taking you for a tour sometime,” Tsurabaya said.

A few moments later, the transport ship “jumped” and deposited Kyle, Tsurabaya, and the jeep back at the same planet it had picked them up from, and at the same spot. Tsurabaya drove the jeep out of the ship, and before them stood the portal to return to Cheyenne mountain, though on this side there was no frame, the portal simply stood, a glowing blue bubble atop the plateau. Tsurabaya drove directly through, and the jeep emerged, as one would expect, into the underground vehicle bay of Cheyenne Mountain Complex from which it had emerged.

Tsurabaya steered the jeep through this vehicle bay, returning to the one on the second sublevel where it had first come from. Kyle and Tsurabaya then exited the jeep and walked to the elevator to return below ground, finding another young man scanning cards of those entering the base proper.

“Very well,” the young man said, reading information from the little screen on his card scanner, “you two have been gone for 16 hours. Due to extenuating circumstances, you’ve been allowed this time off. You’re now to report to your posts. Mr. Tsurabaya, you’re to report to the armory. Mr. Dellschau, you’re to report to the gate room. Head for the northwest offices. Happy first day of work, gents!”

Kyle and Tsurabaya first went to their apartments to drop off their bags, change into fatigues, then report to their stations. Kyle’s apartment was empty, as expected. Kyle and Tsurabaya met again while waiting for the elevator, which was slow to

arrive, and they rode it along with many others. Now that work had begun for all 1,500 arrivals from Camp Hero, the elevators were likely even more swamped than they had been before. At sublevel 34, Tsurabaya moved to alight, and Kyle stopped him momentarily.

“If you see either of my boys, let me know,” Kyle requested.

“Of course,” Tsurabaya said, then turned to leave the elevator.

Kyle deboarded at the 37th sublevel, at the foot of the star-gate, where he then wandered aimlessly for several minutes, looking for anything which could be construed as the “west offices,” before at last flagging someone down, who informed him that he was in fact supposed to be on the 36th sublevel. Kyle returned to the elevator and ascended the roughly 550 feet to reach the level just above the top of the gate room.

Sublevel 36th turned out to be the same as other levels. Clean, white, and efficient in layout. A map stood helpfully on a wall near the elevator, and Kyle studied it until he found the “west offices,” then followed the map. The trip only took a few minutes, as usual in Cheyenne Mountain Complex. At the end, Kyle found a set of wooden double doors reading “west offices,” which he entered. Inside, Kyle found a small reception area, with the rest of the offices being walled off. Kyle instinctively handed his card to the receptionist, who scanned it, then handed it back to Kyle.

“You and your son’s office is in the blue hallway. Take two lefts, one right, then the second left. Have a good first day, Mr. Dellschau,” the receptionist said, with a rehearsed smile.

Kyle followed the directions. Painted on the floors in this section were stripes in various colors, branching off into their own hallways. Kyle’s hallway, as the receptionist had specified, was the one which the blue stripe branched off into. Most of the rooms opening onto these hallways were offices bearing one or

more surnames etched on golden plaques of those offices' occupants. Kyle found one labeled as "Bronsley-Dellschau-Steinel," and entered.

The office was quite spacious, and even though the walls were the same white as the halls outside, the floor had a gray carpet of the kind often found in regular offices. Three large teak desks sat in the room, in a precise row. At one far wall was a metal filing cabinet, and at the other, a short buffet table with a period appropriate percolator, and a few generic sandwich fixings. The desks themselves had monitors on them, and the office chairs were of faux leather and looked reasonably comfortable. On the back wall was an enlarged poster of Monet's *The Haystacks*, which was the closest this office came to having a window. Still, in Kyle's estimation, it was very adequate.

All three of the desks had gold nameplates atop them. Kyle's was at one end, Max's in the middle, and the one belonging to Steinel at the end. Max sat at his desk, casually chatting to Steinel, who was a fairly petite yet sinewy blonde young man, no older than 17, at least externally. He stood at Kyle's entry and extended his hand.

"How do you do? You must be Kyle," Steinel said.

"Yes," Kyle said, taking the outstretched hand, "and I suppose you're David Steinel? Captain of the Edelweiss?"

"No," Steinel said, "that would be my older brother. I'm Franz Steinel. Call me Franz, please. I hate confusion."

"Right. So, Franz, what section are we in?" Kyle asked.

"Gate control," Franz explained, "or as I like to call it, scraping up shit."

"We'll be mostly on combat missions, Dad," Max piped in. "Shame you missed orientation."

"I learn quickly," Kyle said with a shrug. "Why don't you show and tell what you can?"

And so Max did, first showing Kyle the weapons that they'd all been issued, including Kyle's which had been delivered. The primary was a black bullpup plasma rifle, the projectiles of which were approximately the same size as a 5.56 NATO round, with a crosshair sight mounted on top. Next came a handgun. These were also black, very sleek in design, and shot projectiles of the 9mm Parabellum caliber. The handguns looked rather like a Beretta M92, nearly 40 years prior to the M92's release.

Kyle, "gun nut" that he was, was quite taken by the guns. However, he was most impressed by the knife. This knife was of the combat variety, and had a black, rubber coated handle, for easy gripping. The blade was eight inches long, serrated on one edge and straight on the other. The knife was plated in steel. Damascus steel, judging by the water-like pattern in the metal. The edges were of diamond, which Kyle imagined must be the real material of which the blade was constructed. The blade was so sharp that the sheath provided was also lined with diamond.

"You're allowed to have the blade engraved," Franz said helpfully. "Max and I had ours done yesterday."

Max held up his knife, which had indeed been engraved with the words "I hate to cut you off," in Gothic lettering. Kyle properly guffawed at this, feeling a mix of fatherly pride, amusement, and the tiniest hint of disturbance, which he quickly quashed. He was making an effort to be less worrisome as a father, particularly in Max's direction.

After showing Kyle his weapons, Max took to showing Kyle the way around the office computer. Cheyenne Mountain's computer system was very similar to that at Camp Hero, though as usual, much more efficient and "user friendly." It contained not only mission logs, but also a handy directory of Cheyenne Mountain Complex's employees, which Kyle used to locate Harune.

Harune, it turned out, was working one level below, in the gate room, where the Edelweiss was parked and apparently, where the prospective pilots were trained. It seemed that the part of Harune's assignment which said he was staying with Kyle was only referring to his housing.

Last on the things Kyle was shown was a device referred to by the personnel of Cheyenne Mountain Complex as a "personal portal." This was a blue, pocket-sized device with a touchscreen and stylus, which today would be called a PDA. This device contained two notable things. The first was a system for field notes. The second was a very impressive scrollable GPS system which had an interactive map of all the stargates on the planet, color coded by waypoint. Blue for known and contained gates, red for known or suspected gates in the Eastern Bloc, which were inaccessible, black for gates which has closed, and gray for unstable gates whose status was unknown. Kyle counted possibly 80 gates globally, perhaps 25 of which were secured, and according to Franz, new gates opened all the time and old ones closed, their stability as yet not understood scientifically, even to aliens.

A click on one of these gates would give a brief explanation of it, whether it was known, including discovery date, containment date, and if it was known, what planet it led to, although aside from name, there was no information available on these planets.

After learning what he could of the computer system, there was little left for Kyle or anyone to do except chat with his office mates. Franz, it turned out, was also a recent transfer, though less recent than the Project Phoenix transfers. Franz and David had come from Titan just a month prior. Franz was a sniper, apparently one of the best in Der Bund, by his own estimation, at any rate.

The next couple of hours rather dragged, and Max began to complain. Not only of general boredom, but of underground living in general. Max wanted to breathe fresh air and see the sun, and Kyle was unsure when this would be possible. He did promise Max that he'd learn the rules as soon as he possibly could.

Eventually, all the computers in the office began going off. A sort of low, quiet but still audible siren sound. A glance at the screen revealed that the middle third was now covered by a red band.

"That's us!" Franz exclaimed, jumping from his seat. "Grab your gear."

Kyle and Max stood, gathering and holstering their weapons and following Franz from the office. In the hallway, many others from this sector were exiting their offices, having also apparently been summoned, all of them filing down the hallway to the elevator towards the gate room and, presumably, the mission they were being called on. They were met in the hallways by others marching to the gate room, about 50 in total. Norma Jean was in this group, and Kyle and she made eye contact. Kyle was glad to see her, having not seen her since moments after arriving at Cheyenne Mountain.

Upon reaching the gate room, Kyle and the others marched toward the ship hangar. Kyle had never been to that side of the gate room, and the view had been blocked by the massive plinth on which the gate stood. Now, on the approach, one could see that there was in fact a sizable setup below where the ship hovered. Row after row of cobalt blue power armor suits, standing up freely, as well as rack after rack of smartsuits on hangers. The group of soldiers reached them, and lined up, preparing for orders.

Up close, one could see that the ship was not so much triangular as it was manta ray shaped, perhaps 200 feet from wingtip to wingtip, and the bulging center was about 30 feet high at the middle point. On the hull, painted in Gothic lettering of a slightly different shade of black so that it could only be seen in the light, was the ship's name; "Edelweiss." A second, identical ship hovered about 100 feet above the Edelweiss.

The soldiers had stood waiting for about 15 seconds when a young uniformed SS woman with a glass pad strode up, and began reading from her device, handing down mission orders.

"Alright. Looks like suits are not called for. Armor only. Everyone please strip to all but your underwear and armor up. For some of you, this is your first mission with us. On your return, you have the option of having your armor engraved with your callsign. You have five minutes to load out," the young officer with the glass pad monologued, then turned away.

The soldiers then headed into the hangar bay fully, looking for suitably sized armor, as this came in many sizes. Some, such as Franz, were lucky enough to have already had armor suits with their callsigns engraved on them.

Kyle eventually found a set of the right size. Many suits were engraved with callsigns on their left breastplates. Unsure how to put his chosen armor on, Kyle looked around until he saw someone who knew what they were doing, and then followed suit.

The process was actually fairly simple. First, after stripping to all but underwear and socks, the helmet would be given a slight twist, which would release it, and next would come the arms and the legs. The limbs, after twisting off, would automatically expand, while the body would open at the back, allowing one to slip it on like a backwards vest. The body would close, and the

padding on the inside of the armor would tighten to a comfortable tightness. Next, one would step into the legs, which would expand, automatically lock back onto the body at the hips, and again internally tighten. The arms followed the same procedure, then one simply placed the helmet on one's head, and it would automatically join to the rest of the suit at the neck.

The window out of the helmet had an interesting feature, namely an ammo counter displayed just at the side of the glass. The moment Kyle put on his suit, it simply read, in orange letters "ammo counter," however when he picked up his rifle, the counter read a new bit of text; "Rifle: 100%." The same occurred when Kyle picked up his handgun, and when a gun was put down, the counter for it simply vanished. Kyle supposed the armor was sensing all this data based on weight.

The armor, in spite of its bulky appearance, was actually quite lightweight, or so it seemed to the wearer. It moved very fluidly, and the obstacle to movement was mostly psychological. Once one stopped thinking it should feel strange or bulky, it did, and one moved as easily as though one was wearing any other clothes.

His own armor equipped, Kyle holstered his pistol and knife in the slots present on the armor suits, slung his rifle over his back, and at last turned his attention to finding Max, who turned out to be rather struggling with the armor. As Kyle assisted him, they spoke.

Max: "Dad, I don't have a callsign. How do I get one?"

Kyle: "Well, I suppose you just pick one based on context. Why?"

Max: "She said we could have our armor engraved with our callsigns. I'd like that."

Kyle paused for a moment, thinking of a suitable callsign. for Max, and remembering what Jack had told him in Okinawa,

namely that Emmermann family members and associates were typically given callsigns of Ancient Greek characters. At some point before this conversation with Max, Kyle had skimmed over a copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, and thus had some idea of the characters.

Kyle: "How about Heracles?"

Max: "I like that a lot, Dad."

Kyle: "Alright. And since your brother is learning to fly, he can be Icarus."

A few moments later, an unseen voice called out; "Alright people. Start lining up. Time to load out!"

"I would, if I could get this fucking thing on!" A voice shouted from among the soldiers.

Kyle looked around and saw that many were struggling, and others rushing around to help them. As this was happening, a ramp began to slowly lower from the bottom of the Edelweiss. Somehow, by the time this ramp reached the ground, Kyle and the group of soldiers were all fully suited up and ready to board the ship. With no further instructions given, the soldiers began rushing aboard, usually three at a time, as this was what the ramp could accommodate. Kyle made certain to be among the first.

Inside, the ship was perhaps what one would expect of a military dropship. Coming from the ceiling on each side, from the center aisle toward the edges, were three metal bars, which extended from nearly the front to the back, and stood at head height, so one could grip them while standing, as there were no seats, at least in this part of the ship. In front was one large curved window above a complex control panel, and two seats. In the left sat a young petite brunette man, no doubt David Steinel, and in the other sat Harune.

Kyle crowded to the front to watch what happened next. He didn't wish to actively disturb Harune's training, nor did he wish for David to notice him. If David saw his trainee's guardian watching, he might act differently. If he was prone to abusive behavior in any way, Kyle wanted to see it firsthand.

As it turned out, David Steinel was a good instructor. He calmly showed Harune the controls of the ship, in very broken but understandable Japanese. Kyle noticed that David had an implant. It looked rather like a modern (at time of writing) cochlear implant, wired into the pilot's seat. Kyle supposed that eventually, Harune would have to receive an implant like it, unless his abilities were so strong as to make such enhancements unnecessary.

"Everyone hang on! We're ready to fly!" David called out cheerfully.

Kyle and everyone else grabbed onto the six-bar, therefore standing in six rows, three on each side. Kyle turned and watched the frontward wrap-around windows as the inside of the frame of the stargate became filled with a deep, opaque blue light which rippled like flowing water. After a moment, the Edelweiss flew forward through the gate.

Beyond the gate, the Edelweiss emerged onto a beach. A long, white strand, with a crystal blue ocean. The Edelweiss had exited parallel to the ocean, so that one could also see that there was a heavy jungle beyond about a quarter mile of sand. After David Steinel flipped a few more switches, the ship took off again, rapidly accelerating to a speed so high that one couldn't see anything beyond a blur of blue and green, before the Edelweiss stopped again on another beach. With no speedometers visible, and therefore no sense of how fast the Edelweiss had traveled, there was no way to judge distance, which was likely quite far, given that they'd traveled for about 10 minutes.

Upon landing, David addressed the troops.

“Alright recruits! We have a Class 3 threat level. You’re not to investigate the gate’s start point. Team B will do that. You’re only to clear the threat. Trainees stay behind this mission. Sieg Heil!”

“Sir yes Sir! Sieg Heil!” Echoed all on the ship’s deck.

The ramp from which everyone had first entered the ship lowered, and to Kyle’s surprise, the ship’s ceiling also opened, revealing a number of large black boxes which were floating. Several soldiers grabbed these boxes and brought them down the ramp, and everyone debarked. Kyle managed to step over and give Harune a pat on the head before leaving. David Steinel saw this and smiled, but he didn’t remark on it.

The floating boxes were moved to the side, and the ship stayed open. Besides Max, there were less than 10 other trainees who remained on board. Somewhere in the jungle, further up the beach, ominous sounds could be heard. Metal crashing, and the occasional scream or gunshot.

As he always did, Kyle studied their surroundings. The gravity felt the same as Earth’s and the sun was a yellow dwarf G-type star, the same as Sol. The foliage, at least what Kyle could make of it from nearly a half mile away on the beach, was consistent with that found on Earth. So, they were either on Earth or a very similar planet.

The soldiers began advancing towards the sounds. Kyle suddenly realized two things; the first, they’d been given no information, and the second, no one seemed in charge, besides David Steinel, who was likely the highest ranked person, being captain of the Edelweiss. However, he hadn’t exited the ship. Kyle made a snap decision and bounded ahead of the group of soldiers and took charge, holding up his hand to stop, which they did.

“Ladies and gents! Alright, I’m not sure what threat we have here. In fact, I’m not sure where we even are. But I think we should be organized, no? We’re all splitting into groups of—” Kyle did a rapid headcount. “Groups of six. Nine groups of six. You find the gate, find a way to send up a signal. Anyone have better ideas?”

To Kyle’s momentary consternation, he was greeted by raucous laughter, before one of the soldiers stepped forward from the group. A woman, with reddish brown hair, and a call-sign emblazoned on her left breastplate; “Boudicca.” Kyle felt a flash of amusement and smugness that he now had entirely legitimate reasons to look at a woman’s breasts.

“Thank you,” the woman officer said. “But alas, I’m the commanding officer here. I don’t see your callsign.”

“Daedalus,” Kyle said sheepishly. “I apologize ma’am, I didn’t realize we had a commanding officer.”

“No apology needed, Daedalus,” Boudicca said, stepping forward to stand next to Kyle. “It was a test. You passed. No one else seemed interested in structure, or order, or in preparedness.”

“This is going on everyone’s reports.” Boudicca added to the other soldiers, in a voice that could’ve cut glass. “And we’re doing just what Daedalus suggested. Nine groups of six, and if one of you finds the gate, return to the beach, open one of the boxes, get a flare gun, return to the gate, and send up a flare. My suit, as most should know, has an earpiece. You can hear me, I can’t hear any of you. Let’s move out!”

Hurriedly, everyone began splitting into groups of six, as commanded. Kyle was able to find Norma Jean, and they went with four others, all men whom Kyle has since forgotten, though at the time they of course introduced themselves. As they

walked towards the ominous sounds, rifles in hand, Kyle took the opportunity to talk with Norma Jean.

Kyle: "Sorry, NJ. I didn't mean to get you written up."

Norma Jean laughed.

Norma Jean: "I'm sure my reputation will weather it, Kyle. I've thought of you and the Flynns though. Why didn't you seek me out?"

Kyle: "I..... Well, I'm not sure how to answer that. I'm sorry."

Norma Jean laughed again.

Norma Jean: "Loosen up, old boy. You were spending the time with your boys, just as you should. How are they taking it?"

Kyle: "Harune is difficult to read. He's the quietest child you ever saw. Max is doing well, although now he says he wants fresh air."

Norma Jean: "Well, here they let you out on your days off. You just have to ask for a car, at least most of you. I wouldn't be allowed out."

Kyle: "Why the fuck not? You have rights too."

Norma Jean: "For reasons you'll someday find out, I'm at risk of being recognized. Oh look, we're almost there. My callsign is Lorelei, by the way. You should stick with that while we're on missions, they like that around here."

It was true, they had arrived at their destination. However, Norma Jean's deft avoidance of subject hadn't slipped past Kyle's notice.

The sight the soldiers were met with was not an encouraging one. There was a stone paved path leading off the beach into what seemed to be a shanty town within the jungle itself. At the edge of the path were several human limbs, which had clearly been bitten off by something with enormous teeth. Freshly, judging by the fact that the blood had not coagulated. Several buildings had collapsed, and no survivors could be seen, save for

one young man looking around wildly and clutching a hunting rifle, muttering something that was mostly unintelligible.

Judging by the man's appearance, and the Austronesian tongue which he spoke, Kyle was able to judge that they were somewhere in Southeast Asia or some part of Oceania. The soldiers ignored the man as they marched into the village, their rifles raised to shoulder height.

In addition to the destruction, the soldiers found a set of holes in the ground. About seven feet in diameter each, and bored, not natural. They had been driven into the ground by either a tunnel boring machine or some kind of monstrous snake or worm, which gave Kyle a thought. Perhaps these machines or creatures would surface due to vibrations, as the Marauders on Mars had done?

Kyle was apparently not the only one to have this idea, as a few moments later, an announcement came over the earpieces on the armor suits.

"Alright. I want all groups of six to form circles. Tight circles, don't leave any blindspots. Then I want one designated person to shoot the ground three meters ahead of them. If nothing happens after 30 seconds, then the next person in the circle does the same. Be prepared for anything," was Boudicca's command.

Kyle and his group followed this order, standing in a circle in a clearing near the edge of the shanty town. Someone shot at the ground, and the first time, nothing happened. After the pause, another soldier shot. There was a pause, before a low rumbling below ground.

From the ground, right on the spot where the soldier's shots had landed, a monstrous worm emerged. At least seven feet in diameter and 30 feet in length, light blue on the outside, and

slimy. One end of the worm opened, revealing a humongous circular mouth filled with enormous dagger like teeth.

Instantly, Kyle, Norma Jean, and the rest of their group of six snapped into formation, gunning down the monstrosity, which proved very soft. The plasma shells of the soldiers shredded the beast, spraying its gooey remains on the forest like a splatter painting. Among the remains were several partially digested humans which the worm had consumed.

What followed was surprisingly brief, lasting no more than a couple of hours. The groups of soldiers swept the shantytown, and then spread out further into the jungle. Kyle's group wound up killing seven worms, while the numbers the other groups of soldiers killed is unknown. At some point, a flair went up, and Boudicca gave the order that the groups were to begin angling the direction of their sweeps towards the flare, and regroup there.

Kyle's group happened to be fairly close to the spot from which the flair had gone up, and so were the first group to reach the spot, besides the flair senders themselves. They found a large clearing, in the center of which was the offending gate which had made this mission necessary to begin with.

The gate was pale blue, and looked like a large translucent orb, floating about five feet off the ground. Gradually, the other groups of soldiers arrived, and Boudicca began handing down orders.

"Alright people, now we surround the gate, and wait for Team B to arrive," Boudicca said.

All the soldiers lined up side by side, surrounding the gate, their guns trained on it. Any more worms, or anything else coming through the portal, would not make it far through the gate. Boudicca's suit of armor, unlike all the others, had a wrist

mounted computer, which she flipped up and began typing something on, presumably calling in “Team B.”

Just a few minutes later, a ship arrived, one identical to the Edelweiss. The ship shot by overhead of the soldiers, then halted on the portion of the beach nearest the clearing, lowering until the trees put it out of sight of the soldiers.

They didn’t have long to wait. Soon, they were greeted by the sight of about a dozen soldiers who were pushing a levitating platform, on which stood a large black stone cube, each side of which was about 12 feet in width. The cube sat on a slightly larger base of the same black rock, the entire assembly being on the aforementioned levitating platform.

The platform was brought within a few feet from the gate, at which point one of the soldiers from the incoming group lifted the cube, via telekinesis. Once this was done, one could see that the cube was in fact a box, hollow on the inside. Another soldier, again using telekinesis, lifted the slab on which the box had stood, and placed it squarely under the gate. This done, the box was lifted up over the gate and then lowered, thereby encasing the gate entirely in black stone, presumably trapping it.

“Alright, the gate is secured. Now we sweep again, in all directions. Whenever I’m satisfied there’s no threat left, we’ll regroup at the ship and head back home. Now let’s move!” Boudicca ordered.

All the soldiers split off, doing their sweep as directed. Kyle’s group didn’t find any more worms. It’s unknown if any other groups did, although Kyle was fairly certain he heard no gunshots. Soon enough, Boudicca was apparently satisfied, as the order went out for the soldiers to regroup at the Edelweiss. They did so, and with the passengers reboarded and the mysterious boxes they’d brought with them restowed, the ship flew

back the way it had arrived, through the first gate and back to Cheyenne Mountain Complex.

Surprisingly, when the ship emerged, it did so facing not the hangar bay, but the wall opposite to it, with the monster railgun facing it. After a moment, David Steinel reversed the ship, flying backwards through the now empty frame of the gate, thereby backing the ship into the hangar bay, where it at last stopped. When the ramp lowered, Kyle sent Max to change clothes and return to either the office or the apartment, as Kyle was determined to speak to David Steinel and Harune.

The crowd was thinning in the ship, and Kyle was making his way forward, when there was a tap on the back of his helmet, and he turned to see Boudicca.

“Daedalus, I’d like to see you in my office on level 36 in an hour,” was all Boudicca said, before turning to alight.

Kyle walked to the front of the ship, and was able to talk for a few minutes with both David Steinel (more correctly, Captain Steinel, it turned out) and Harune. While he’d never been an instructor before, Captain Steinel said he was enjoying Harune’s company, and to Kyle’s relief, Harune seemed to agree. In fact, Harune seemed to have noticeably brightened up. He’d needed a friend, Kyle supposed. With this settled, Kyle left the Edelweiss.

In the hangar bay, many soldiers were still changing back into their uniforms, and some were having their suits of armor engraved by a young woman strolling around with what looked like an oversized pen, from which projected a blue laser. Max walked up to Kyle, proudly displaying his newly engraved suit, with the callsign of “Heracles” which Kyle had chosen for him, on the left breastplate.

Kyle had his own suit engraved with his own callsign of “Daedalus,” then changed into his fatigues once again, and walked with Max to the elevator, and then up to level 36, where

Kyle asked the same receptionist who that morning had handed him his card where he might find Boudicca's office. The receptionist seemed confused momentarily, then explained that Boudicca's title was Kommandant Kassner, and her office was in the "south offices." Kyle found they were largely identical to the "west offices," and he located Kommandant Kassner's office fairly easily, after receiving a few directions.

Kyle knocked on the door, and was greeted by a terse "Come in, Daedalus," which he obeyed, finding Kassner seated behind a very large desk. This office looked largely the same in size and layout as the one Kyle shared with Max and Franz, except that this one had red carpeting rather than gray, and that Kassner had it to herself.

Kassner: "At ease, Daedalus."

Kyle: "If I may ask Ma'am--"

Kassner: "You may, but it's Sir. None of this 'Ma'am' shit."

Kyle: "If I may ask Sir, how did you know it was me at the door?"

Kassner: "Well, you're the only one I was expecting, and I can tell you're always punctual."

Kyle: "Is that a compliment, Sir?"

Kassner: "It's an observation. What is a compliment is the reason I brought you in here. You impressed me today. You were the only one of 54 who showed any interest in doing things correctly. Why?"

Kyle shrugged.

Kyle: "I think that when operations are done in a shitty, disordered way, people die. It's what happened at Camp Hero, from what I saw and heard."

Kassner: "Exactly. It's that exact chaos I hope to root out of both my own recruits and all the ones who came in from Camp

Hero recently. I'm going to keep my eye on you. If you need help here, you can come to me, Daedalus."

Kyle: "Thank you, Sir."

Kassner: "You've no need to thank me. Dismissed."

Kyle did not leave however, standing and mulling a certain question which had been brewing in his mind.

Kassner: "Did I miss something?"

Kyle: "No, Sir. I just had a question."

Kassner: "Well spit it the fuck out Kid, tomorrow doesn't exist."

Kyle: "What happens to survivors? Like in that village, what happens to those who survive those sorts of incidents?"

Kassner: "Well. Before I can answer that, I have to trust that what I tell you won't leave this room."

Kyle: "Of course, Sir."

Kassner: "The procedure is thus; B Team locates survivors, and puts them down with a sonic gun that puts them to sleep. When this is done, they radio in to a base called Fort Worden. A team arrives from there, takes the survivors, and distributes them in the colonies, with their memories erased. That answer your question?"

Kyle: "Yes, I believe so Sir. Thank you."

Kyle then turned and left, half shellshocked at this revelation, and half thinking that it was what he'd expected. These people never passed up an opportunity to have another body in their machine, Kyle thought.

Kyle made his way back to his office, and found that it was closing time for the "west offices." Max and Franz were laying their weapons on the table, explaining that someone would soon be coming by to take their guns to the armory, to be reloaded and serviced, and that they'd be back in the offices by

morning. Kyle and Max then made their way back to their apartment. Their new lives at Cheyenne Mountain Complex had well and truly begun, and Kyle was feeling quite optimistic about them.

Author's note. At first, I was going to make some sort of apology to the reader for my inclusion of the fairly graphic story relating to Kyle's genitalia, but I have decided against it. Kyle asked that this story be included, so it's unfair to him to apologize for it. The second reason is that I am telling a real life story, and real life is not genteel, as some seem to think it is or should be. I refuse to apologize for reality.

Chapter 5

Kyle's first Stargate Program mission, it turned out, had occurred on a Thursday, and his days off were Tuesday and Wednesday. However, missions were in far less abundance here than at Camp Hero. Gone were the days of constant, multiple times a day missions which came without warning. This isn't to say that Kyle's time was idle. Far from it.

When not on missions, Kyle was tasked with instructing Max. At long last, he was allowed to actually train his trainee. And so Kyle and Max spent a good deal of time in the armory and dojo on level 34. Kyle wasn't able to see much of Harune save for in the evenings, as he of course was in training by David Steinel on board the Edelweiss.

Harune seemed to be settling very well indeed. Being given a purpose and having his abilities celebrated had done him much good, as had all the new sights he was getting to see when flying with David, though he was not allowed to leave the ship at this point in his training.

As a result of all this, Harune began acting more his age. He became more talkative and boisterous, and even stopped hiding behind Kyle whenever company came over to apartment 1674. This all greatly relieved Kyle. All in all, life at Cheyenne Mountain Complex in that period was working out very well indeed.

During his first week of work, Kyle was called on two additional missions, after the first depicted in the previous chapter. I'll describe them briefly.

The first was another combat and clearing mission, this one in some mountains dealing with a small pack of 12 foot tall tusked wolves. This one was quite short, and Kyle theorized it took place in the western Canadian Rockies, as one of the paintings in his and the boys' apartment was of the west Canadian Rockies, and the row of mountains here looked suspiciously similar, however it couldn't be confirmed.

The second turned out to be a diplomatic mission, about a dozen soldiers escorting one very young looking SS woman, who came unarmed and unarmored, bearing the callsign of "Gefjun."

The mission went over simply. The Edelweiss landed in what seemed to be wetlands or jungle, next to a Mayan type pyramid. Those on the ground could see the light of the offending gate emanate from the top room of the pyramid. For the first time in Kyle's experience, the aliens coming through the gate were sentient, with humanoid bodies about 10 feet in height, with the heads of snakes, their scales in various colors, wearing loin-cloths. These aliens were busily studying the pyramid, and barely even looked up at the arrival of the Edelweiss.

Gefjun, accompanied by a pair of soldiers, walked calmly up to one of the aliens, who seemingly directed her to another, presumably the leader. Gefjun and this alien stood before each other for several minutes, having a telepathic conversation which Kyle eventually tapped into. He discovered that Gefjun was explaining to this alien that he and his people had stumbled onto a planet they were not allowed to be on without prior permission, and the aliens calmly left, allowing the gate to be secured and the Edelweiss to return home.

An innocuous and very quick mission, to be sure. However, it was Kyle's first time ever seeing diplomacy which was planned, reasoned, and executed.

By the time that Kyle's days off (and therefore the boys' also, as his codependents) came around, Kyle was beginning to feel the pressure. Not the pressure of his job, far from it. Rather, he was beginning to feel the air pressure. Working deep underground in a sunless office with pressurized, continuously recycled air is quite wearing on one who isn't used to it, even for Kyle who didn't breathe, but could still feel the movement and pressure of air. As the day before his day off was winding down, Kyle spoke to Franz.

Kyle: "How would I go about getting a car for a day off? Or money?"

Franz: "Well, it's simple really. You take your money for the week, ask for a car, and go wherever you want for two days. Around here, I recommend Garden of the Gods."

Max: "Money for the week?"

Franz: "What shithole are you from? Yes, you'll get paid for your week's work."

Kyle: "Max and I aren't used to that. How civilized."

Sure enough, not long after, the office receptionist came by, handing out envelopes with names printed on them. Kyle and Max promptly shredded theirs open, finding that they'd been given 60 dollars and 25 dollars, respectively. Coming from years of never being paid, it seemed almost unfair to receive this money.

On the way back to apartment 1647, Kyle and Max ran into Jack and Andrew Flynn, whom they'd barely seen since they'd arrived at Cheyenne Mountain Complex, and the two families discussed their new positions, with Jack revealing that he'd been given an infantry post, as usual, and that Andrew had also received this type of job, as one would expect. The Flynnns, like Kyle, were beginning to relax.

Tuesday morning came, and Kyle and the boys woke up to the lights in their apartment gradually coming on, as was common. Just because it was their day off didn't mean they were allowed to sleep in, it would appear. And so they got up, putting on casual clothing this time, Kyle in his signature flight jacket, now with the American flag patch. They strode to the elevator and up to the second level vehicle bay, where Kyle remembered having seen a number of "normal" cars. All three of them brought their money. They had with them 105 dollars in total.

"Right," the young man at the entrance of the vehicle bay said, upon hearing Kyle's request. "You're to take any of the Earth type cars we have available. The keys are under the driver's seat. It must be returned by tomorrow at 7:00 PM, no exceptions. The tires are ultra reinforced, no need to worry about that. Don't get in a situation where you'll need to show identification. Any damage to the car will be coming from your pay."

"All of your pay," the young man added, making eye contact with Max and Harune as he did.

"Yeah, fuck you too," Max muttered, just loudly enough for the man to hear as the trio walked away.

Kyle and the boys made their way to the section of the vehicle bay which housed civilian vehicles. Kyle was no expert on automobiles, especially the 1950s American variety, and in fact rather disapproved of them as a concept. He was looking at some type of station wagon when he heard an excited cry.

"Dad! Let's take this one!" Max called out to him.

Kyle turned to see the boys standing and smiling excitedly at one particular car. A bright red 1950 Studebaker Commander convertible.

“Gents, I don’t think that’s..... oh fuck it, why not?” Kyle said resignedly. “But keep your hands in the car, and all other body parts for that matter.”

“Yippeel!” Harune shouted, climbing into the backseat without bothering to wait for an open door, and Max followed suit.

Kyle smiled, then climbed into the driver’s seat, finding the keys just where he’d been told they would be, and started the car for the trip out. Once he started driving, Kyle did have to admit that there was a certain aesthetic appeal to this car, both in how it looked and in how it drove. Kyle rolled in to one of the exits, with a large sign above it reading “mountains.” At the entry stood a young soldier scanning cards.

“Alright,” he said after scanning Kyle, Max, and Harune’s cards, “you’re gonna drive here, up a long winding passage. At the end of it you’ll find a portal. Take it, you’re on a dirt road in the woods. Follow it to a paved road, turn right for Colorado Springs, left to head more north.”

“Thank you,” Kyle said, accepting his card back and driving.

They drove up a long, winding passageway, which in this fairly small car wasn’t too difficult, as there was plenty of room. At the top of the passage, just as the card scanning soldier had said, was a portal of the rectangular kind, through which one could see out to whatever lay beyond, in this case, a dirt road in the forest, as promised.

Kyle drove through the portal, and was greeted by a wave of cool, mild mountain air, and the scent of pine trees. Max and Harune stood and breathed huge lungfuls of this air, then to Kyle’s surprise, began shouting into the wind. Not anything in particular, except perhaps some very poorly executed bird calls. They were celebrating their moment of freedom. Had Kyle not made an effort to concentrate on the road, he’d have cried.

Not 15 minutes into driving on this dirt road, Kyle reached a paved road, which the dirt road intersected and branched at. Kyle was, for a few seconds, overwhelmed with a feeling of indecision. This was the first time he'd had such freedom. Rarely in his life had he been even able to choose what he ate, and he'd never been able to choose where he was to drive. Now, for two days, he could go wherever he and his boys chose.

Kyle didn't quite realize it, but this indecision was part of programming. He wasn't meant to be able to choose such things. Max, ever the intuitive, sensed all this and leaned forward to Kyle.

"Drive right, Dad," Max said.

Kyle smiled, gave Max a telepathic thanks, and drove right. They were on a truly breathtaking road in the low mountains, and before too long, began to see signs of civilization. It was very early morning on the surface, so shops were only just beginning to open up.

Kyle and the boys first stopped in at an all-purpose travel shop. They bought several tourist maps. The place also had a counter where people could trade in or sell their old cameras, and on a whim, Kyle purchased one. A fairly cheap plastic one, with no accoutrements, which Kyle didn't yet know enough about American currency to catch that the camera's price was very inflated at 14 dollars. He also purchased a number of rolls of film, and Kyle, Max, and Harune set out again, only stopping to buy a few fixings for a picnic lunch.

I will skim over those two halcyon days Kyle spent with Max and Harune, driving to and fro in the general vicinity of Colorado Springs, spending most of their first day at the Garden of the Gods, a fitting name for a gorgeous country park, where they'd come to spend many happy weekend trips. I'll only recount a few notable incidents from this first trip.

The first one happened in Garden of the Gods itself, on day one. Harune, out of wonderment born of total ignorance, picked up a small rattlesnake. Harune, from having grown up until a few months prior in New Munich colony, had never seen a snake that was neither a sentient alien nor an equally sentient book character. Kyle was able to somehow, telepathically and calmly, get Harune to put the snake down and slowly back away.

As the trio drove away from Garden of the Gods, Kyle suddenly pondered, with bewilderment, why the snake had not only not bitten Harune, but had seemed exceedingly calm. Almost drugged. Kyle wondered if perhaps the snake was in some way drunk from the sun. Was that even possible, for a reptile? He determined to find some way to look it up. Or perhaps, being in a public park, the snake may have been used to such treatment.

For a while, Kyle didn't consider any indications this incident may have conveyed about Harune's psionic prowess, perhaps revealing an ability that even Harune himself wasn't altogether aware of. But Max was either more insightful, or he had some knowledge that Kyle didn't yet have, as he had calmly snapped a picture of Harune with the snake.

Kyle and the boys stopped in a motel for the night, at the base of some mountain or other. Kyle slept in one room, Max and Harune in another. The motel had a small bar, in which Kyle found a willing woman. It was the first time since leaving Camp Hero that he'd had sex with anyone other than himself. He'd become a bit less insatiable because of it, until this woman, and Kyle was back to his womanizing ways right afterwards.

The last noteworthy incident again concerned Harune, but in a more conventional way. While Harune had received a few odd looks, and Kyle by extension, for speaking with him in Japanese, it was on the second day that they faced real racism.

The trio had pulled in at a diner for lunch, in what may have been the town of Monument, Colorado, though Kyle won't swear to it. Harune was unable to read English, however the menu had pictures, and Harune was pointing to what he wanted, saying it in Japanese, with Kyle translating. The waitress thought Harune was adorable, so at first, nothing seemed amiss.

This changed a few minutes later, when a man in a Marine Corps uniform with an eyepatch walked through the door. Kyle dutifully saluted him, and the young soldier returned it, then immediately sneered when he saw Kyle and Harune in rapt conversation, in full Japanese, and walked past them muttering something about "traitors."

Kyle supposed at first that this was all that would happen, and so didn't think much of it, until a stocky dark haired man in the diner uniform emerged from somewhere. This man, unlike the rest of the staff, wore a light blue sailor's cap, denoting his status as the diner's proprietor.

"Get out. All of you. We don't serve Japs," he said to Kyle, not even bothering to introduce himself.

"I beg your pardon?" Kyle said with a slight chuckle.

"You heard me. Get the Jap out of my diner. My friend in the uniform over there? He lost his eye at Iwo Jima. I don't serve the enemy," the proprietor said.

"Now listen here, you fucking—" Max began, shooting up from his chair, his voice rising with each word.

Kyle placed a hand on Max's shoulder, calmly but firmly.

"Don't make a scene, Mi Pequeño. It's not worth it," Kyle said, before drawing to his full height, which was well over a foot higher than the proprietor.

Kyle leaned over slowly, making himself eye level with the diner's proprietor, who audibly gulped.

“Now. I have an example to set for my boys, so I’ll follow my own advice and not make a scene. But just so you know, I’m going to tell everyone I know that your food tastes like boiled dog shit. That’s a fair exchange. Good day,” Kyle said, his voice a deadly calm, then simply took the boys’ hands and left.

This being the 1950s, there were other diners about. Kyle, Max, and Harune found one, and here, they were allowed to eat without incident. Harune had his first ice cream float, which resulted in a massive sugar rush.

There would be many times and weekends like this during Kyle’s time at Cheyenne Mountain Complex. At some point, Kyle traded in the cheap camera for an Argus C3, which became the official family camera. He’d generally drop off the rolls of film at a developer, and pick them up the next week. He wound up taking thousands of pictures of his boys, and of many other sites around Colorado.

The mountain air brought out the best in Harune. He became far less shy, and started showing an actual interest in learning English, which he’d only halfheartedly responded to Kyle’s attempts to teach. One evening after one of the first few weekend outings, Harune approached Kyle as he was reading some book or other he’d bought in town.

Harune: “Kyle, may I bring a friend for dinner?”

Kyle: “Good English. Who is your friend?”

Harune: “He’s someone from training. Can I bring him please?”

Kyle switched to Japanese, to end the formality of speaking.

Kyle: “Alright. Who is he? What is your friend’s name?”

Harune: “Joshie. He trains on the other ship.”

Kyle: “Is he from Camp Hero?”

Harune: “I don’t know, I think he said he was born in Ireland.”

Kyle: "I don't mind him coming over. Is he your own age?"

Harune: "He is, does that matter?"

Kyle: "A little. I want you to have friends, but unless they're your age, I don't want you bringing them over here unless I'm here too. Roger?"

Harune: "Roger! Sieg Heil!"

Kyle: "That's the spirit. Now can I read my book?"

Harune nodded, and ran off to his and Max's room, to do whatever it was Harune and Max did. Kyle was decent enough not to ask questions about what that might be, although several times he'd overheard the boys teaching each other how to swear in various languages as well as fighting over the comic books Andrew Flynn brought from somewhere. Typical activities for boys of their age.

Harune also had developed a nickname for Max; "Kyodai Kuma." Translated; "Brother Bear." This was because, according to Harune, Max ate like a bear.

The next evening, Harune's friend did come for dinner. His full name was Joshua McBride, born in Dublin. He was just shy of three years Harune's senior. He was quite lanky, with reddish blonde hair and light blue eyes. Unlike Harune or Max, he had essentially no one but his friends his own age. He was a truly "typical" Camp Hero kid, who'd survived entirely without adult assistance for years.

Kyle found Joshie very funny. He had kept his Irish accent and mannerisms, as a form of rebellion, and had an excellent sense of comedic timing. He was also helping Harune with his English, which Kyle appreciated, and so Kyle considered Harune lucky to have a friend like Joshie.

There are many other good times I could talk at length about from the few years Kyle and sons spent at Cheyenne Mountain Complex. More trips especially, such as those on birthdays.

Here, families were given a weekend leave when a family member had a birthday. The Edelweiss would fly Kyle and his boys to a place they chose, usually somewhere outside London or Hong Kong, where they'd spend their birthdays. Once, at Harune's behest, they went to see Louis Armstrong's performance live in London.

These stories are meaningful to myself, Kyle, and the boys. However, I cannot expect them to be so for the reader, and recounting them would only serve as emotional gratification, so I'll only relate one last important incident.

Sometime in winter 1953, on one of the weekend trips, Kyle and the boys went into the city of Denver. Here, they saw something rather shocking.

It was a large poster for a new film titled *Niagara*. This poster featured Norma Jean. Here, she was blonde, and called Marilyn Monroe. A clone perhaps, Kyle wondered? He'd heard vaguely of the practice of cloning. Or perhaps an undercover identity from a time loop? Whatever the case, this explained why she couldn't be seen in public.

As idealized as I may be making this period of Kyle's life seem, that is not to say there were not harried times or operations. I will relate one that stands out.

While Kyle and the rest of the Camp Hero assets were at Cheyenne Mountain Complex to participate in the Stargate Program, they were still, on paper, assets of Project Phoenix, which was an ongoing project, in spite of having been dispersed. As a result, they were still occasionally required to do missions under the Project Phoenix umbrella.

This mission, Kyle believes, occurred after he had been at Cheyenne Mountain Complex for about six months, however he's uncertain of the chronology. Kyle was called into the office of the highest ranked officer of Project Phoenix, which at this

time was Ezekiel. His office was on the same level as Kyle's, and so Kyle went in, after receiving a notice on his computer.

Ezekiel's office was quite large, with a black carpet rather than the gray of Kyle's office, Ezekiel himself sitting behind his desk in a custom-made oversized chair with a hole in back for his tail. As Kyle walked in, Ezekiel was sitting at his desk, typing something on his computer using a pencil to press the keys, apparently unable to type using his claws. Kyle stood before Ezekiel's desk and Roman saluted.

Kyle: "Sieg Heil."

Ezekiel: "Sieg Heil. At ease, soldier. Have a seat."

And so Kyle sat.

Kyle: "Do I have an assignment, Sir? Is the Entity wanting something? I'd begun to forget it was here."

At these words, Kyle felt something. An ever so slight tingling in his brainstem, followed by, for just a split second, a wave of incredible coldness washing over every inch of his body, and a flash of terror. The Long Island AI/Entity making its undeniable Eldritch presence known, for just one tiny instant.

Kyle's expression must have changed, because when the wave left, Ezekiel was wearing what seemed to be a lizard equivalent of a sympathetic expression, and Kyle recovered himself.

Ezekiel: "You are correct. I'm sending you and a team on an errand into Cuba."

Kyle: "Very well Sir. Where's the team?"

Ezekiel: "I'll summon them in a minute. I got you alone because I want you to lead this mission this time."

Kyle: "I appreciate it Sir, but am I actually qualified?"

Ezekiel: "You only learn by doing. And yes, you're qualified."

Kyle: "Well Sir, what's the mission?"

And so Kyle was briefed, thoroughly, and then Ezekiel called in the rest of the team for their briefing. As usual, I won't

recount the briefing in detail. However, Kyle and team were going to an American facility in Cuba. This being 1953, Cuba was still essentially an American puppet, however this facility was in some way politically rogue, hence the necessity for a secret military operation. Kyle and crew were to retrieve from it one simple, peculiar item; a vial of blood. This blood had been drawn from an alien in a shot down ship, the alien being the only known specimen of her kind. The blood was to be delivered to a facility in Washington State known as Fort Worden.

The team chosen had a few familiar faces; Danny, Brian Foster, Anya Mittelbraun, and Franz Steinel. It was the first time Kyle had worked with Danny since leaving Camp Hero, many moons ago.

The briefing done, the crew gathered their weapons, then headed to their apartments to change into summertime clothing and pack their bags. They were to start out undercover as tourists at a resort while they did their reconnaissance. They packed their bags, and for the first time, they experienced walking through the stargate rather than being delivered by the Edelweiss.

Walking through the Cheyenne Mountain stargate proved a good deal easier than the Camp Hero portal. No longer was there a tunnel which had to be walked down with eyes forward. Here, one simply stepped through and arrived at one's destination. In this case, the group showed up on a jungle road.

"Alright. Let's fuck Cuba up!" Danny said, in his usual Long Island fashion.

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Kyle said briskly. "We march east. There'll be a village, and we take a bus to the resort. Act lost and stupid. I don't think that'll be difficult for you lot."

An eruption of laughter broke among the group, and they set out. As they discovered, Kyle was right. Or rather, the brief he'd

been given. The group found themselves in a small village resembling a shanty town, which had a small bus station, and after putting on the “dumb American” act, they managed to board the bus headed for their desired destination, a resort town on the southern shore of Cuba.

Kyle and crew found that the resort rented small motorboats, which they took out every day to do their reconnaissance. In their rooms they found period appropriate guns, in pieces to be assembled, including a sniper rifle for Franz’s benefit.

The facility, whoever it was owned by, was a concrete block. Very few personnel seemed to work there at all, and most were scientists. The facility apparently relied on its remoteness for security rather than military protection. It seemed that most lived on-site, and would come outside at their lunch hour to sit around on the beach and eat, making them vulnerable.

It was almost too easy, and very cold blooded. With his sniper rifle, Franz took out the occupants of the beach. It was fast, but quite bloody. Kyle couldn’t help but wince slightly at the murder of these unarmed civilians, but he maintained his focus and composure.

The employees of the facility dispatched, the speedboat was beached, and Kyle, Jack, Danny, and Anya alighted, guns drawn, and set towards the facility. In their reconnaissance, the crew had spotted several entrances. They chose the one which seemed to be the most traversed by employees. It had a biometric lock, but was not built to withstand being breached by a supersoldier.

The inside of the facility was, as the crew had anticipated, a scientific one. A maze of laboratories and dormitories, with few personnel still inside. Those few were unceremoniously gunned down.

“We should look in the refrigerators. They always keep blood in refrigerators,” Anya suggested.

“You heard her. Let’s move!” Kyle ordered.

And “move” they did, splitting up and sweeping the facility from end to end, looking in refrigerator after refrigerator, until they received a telepathic “ping” from Danny that he’d found the blood, and they followed his telepathic “voice” to where he directed.

Danny stood in front of a refrigerator with a glass front, and the others crowded around to see that, sure enough, there were a number of vials of blood labeled as “Crash retrieval specimen” in Spanish. They found a case to carry it in, and after some discussion, chose to take all the vials of blood which were available.

The blood was very strange. It was a very dark blue, almost black, and it moved on its own in the vials.

Danny: “Just what do they want with this shit anyway?”

Jack: “Probably nothing good, given where it’s going to end up.”

Kyle: “You know Fort Worden?”

Anya: “Jack and I spent a lot of time there in our childhoods. It’s for experiments and so forth.”

Kyle: “I see. Well, it’s time to move. Someone may discover us. Let’s load out!”

The blood was packed away, and the crew left, returning to the hotel. Several of them had the idea of staying in the resort longer, but Kyle quashed the thought. They didn’t need to wait around to be caught. And so, as he’d been instructed, Kyle sent up a telepathic signal to Ezekiel, who said he’d arrange the reopening of the portal in the same spot as before, and Kyle was to personally deliver the blood to Fort Worden.

The crew walked back to the portal, where it had first been opened. Most of the crew went to change clothes and do paper-work, Kyle headed to the below ground parking garage with the blood, and was directed to the gateway to Fort Worden.

Kyle exited the portal to find himself in a rather woodsy area, scented by cedar trees and the ocean. The frame of the portal stood on its own, looking rather like a large, freestanding door-frame. Kyle could see perhaps 10 other such portals in detached frames here and there in the woods around him. No one else was about, and there was only a rudimentary path that Kyle could see. With a shrug, he followed the path.

The path wound a short way through the cedar forest, before emerging onto a narrow paved road. A bit further up the road on the right were a few small, old fashioned apartment buildings of gray clapboard, and on the left was a large white three-story house. Kyle saw a woman entering one of the apartments and called out.

“Hey! I have to deliver a package?” Kyle called out.

“Battery Kinzie!” the woman shouted back, then slammed the door of her apartment in no uncertain terms.

“Great! Now just what the fuck is Battery Kinsey?” Kyle called back, knowing full well he wouldn’t receive an answer.

As it turned out, he needn’t have worried. At the head of the path, past the house and a few more gray apartments, was a large wooden sign directory, with arrows and a basic map carved into an oversized board, with one of the destinations being the fabled “Battery Kinzie.” Kyle followed this map, along a path which ran near the beach, affording an excellent view of the mighty Pacific.

What the map did not say was that the walk was very long. Well over a mile, by Kyle’s estimation. The path went along the

beach, past a district of the township of Port Townsend, Washington State, though of course Kyle didn't know this, and merely saw a small waterfront town. By now, Kyle did know to look at the sky, and notice the clouds were moving and the sunlight was totally static. This place was in a time bubble, as Camp Hero was.

All along the walk on the approach of the fort, Kyle saw more portals. These were all open, and of the kind which stood in tall rectangular frames. About two miles offshore was a monster stargate, partially submerged, and at least 4,000 feet in diameter. Certainly the largest Kyle had ever seen.

As Kyle walked, he began to see the fort. He noted that this fort was of the Endicott variety, meaning that it was a large concrete structure rising from the ground, wrapping around the coast, facing the water, constructed of a series of bunkers which were covered with grass so as to hide their presence from the sky.

Eventually, Kyle reached Battery Kinzie, which proved to be built off the far left end of the fort, and had two pairs of stairs coming off the front. Also in front was another portal, which Kyle rounded, finding a reception area, open to the outside, where he stopped, and spoke to the young receptionist.

Kyle: "I have a delivery."

Receptionist: "What sort of delivery?"

Kyle: "Blood."

Receptionist: "Human or otherwise?"

Kyle: "Definitely otherwise."

Receptionist: "Right. The doc always wants that delivered in person. You have an ID?"

Kyle produced his Cheyenne Mountain ID, which the receptionist scanned.

Receptionist: "Mr. Dellschau. Alright, you have clearance. You need to take this to laboratory B. Head out of here, follow the fort a ways, and you'll come to a series of bunkers, coming from either side of the path. It'll be the fourth bunker on the right, you enter, then just keep heading below ground. Got it?"

Kyle: "Follow fort, fourth bunker on the right, go down, got it."

Kyle took off, following the receptionist's directions. Sure enough, he found the fourth bunker rising from the ground. The entry to this bunker, like all the ones that surrounded it, was a set of black metal double doors. Kyle opened them, and saw a flight of concrete stairs leading to a white door with a card scanner, which he used. To his surprise, the door opened into an elevator, with only two buttons, one with an up arrow, the other a down arrow. Kyle stepped in and pressed the down arrow.

The elevator went down a good distance, reopening in a hallway, white on one side and glass on the other. The hallway had a gradual slope, spiraling down into the ground. On the white side were unmarked doors at odd intervals. Kyle went to the glass side and looked down.

Kyle saw that the hallway wound down rather slowly, with the bottom surrounding a large laboratory. Within it were a number of massive tables containing scientific equipment which Kyle didn't understand. A bit more alarming was the presence of a number of covered autopsy tables and a single dentist's chair with restraints. They did experiments here, on both living and dead specimens, Kyle realized. Unlike the other parts of the base Kyle had seen, the lab buzzed with activity.

Kyle, with his precious cargo, began his descent into the laboratory. The spiral was very gradual, and so the walk was rather long, but at last Kyle tracked the lab, and when no one paid him

any attention, he flagged down one of the passing staff members.

“Excuse me. I have to deliver some blood?” Kyle said, gesturing at his bag.

“Right. That’s Hall’s territory. I’ll fetch him for you,” the staff member replied, and then rushed off again.

The staff member returned to Kyle a few moments later, bringing with her a scientist in a white labcoat, carrying a glass pad. He was nearly Kyle’s height, with bright white hair. His extremely sharp cheekbones and yellowish green eyes betrayed that he was not entirely human in nature. The embroidery on his labcoat read “Dr. Hall.” He was quite cordial, and took the vials of blood, also having Kyle sign on the glass pad, and then sent Kyle off, of course never offering further explanation. With that, Kyle left to return to Cheyenne Mountain.

Kyle was on the path just past the rows of bunkers when, out of the woods, a soccer ball came flying.

“Ay, Dios mio,” a young boy’s voice wailed from the woods.

“Jason?” Kyle called back in surprise, and sure enough, it was Jason Roth who emerged from among the cedars, looking for his ball.

Kyle hadn’t seen Jason in over a year, and so rushed forward to him. They chatted for a minute. It turned out it was Jason’s 11th birthday, and his mother had essentially kicked him out of the house (one of the bunkers) while his birthday dinner was being cooked, hence why he was playing kickball alone in the woods.

Kyle decided he hadn’t been specifically ordered to return immediately after he delivered the blood. So, for the next two hours, Kyle played kickball with Jason at a clearing in the woods, talking about this and that, with Kyle teaching Jason the proper

way to kick. Eventually, Sondra emerged, calling Jason in to dinner, and Jason insisted Kyle stay, so he did.

The Roth household was rather remarkable, as houses go. It was a converted bunker, the color scheme was deliberately all very light, so that one wouldn't miss the sunlight, and not a single convenience was missing. Underground living perfected.

Ivan Roth, by this point, had returned (voluntarily or not) to Project Phoenix and his family, and so he was present for the dinner of duck cassoulet and chocolate raspberry cake. For Jason's sake, Kyle managed to be civil, and Roth reciprocated, which seemed almost an improvement, not that Kyle believed the sincerity of it.

Before I end this chapter, I need to recount one last story, again with Harune. This was, Kyle is fairly certain, about a year and a half into his time at Cheyenne Mountain. Kyle and the boys were in their apartment, having dinner as usual, when Harune gave Kyle some life changing (for Harune) news.

Harune: "Father, I have some big news."

By this point, Harune had begun calling Kyle "Father," which made Kyle very happy, and he was also now fluent in English.

"Well, spit it the fuck out Kid," Kyle said good naturedly.

Harune: "They've cleared me for the field. Tomorrow I'm to pick out a gun and begin training with it. I don't think I know fuck all about guns. Will you help me?"

Kyle resisted the urge to hug Harune. Him and Max had reached the age where they didn't appreciate hugs except perhaps at their birthdays and Christmas, and Kyle was trying his best to respect that.

Kyle: "It would be my honor."

Kyle and Harune did indeed go to the armory the next day. Tsurabaya was still running it at this time, and under his tenure, he'd undertaken the project of expanding the armory of

Cheyenne Mountain Complex, making it modern and competitive with other bases, both in setup and in selection. Kyle and Harune shopped for hours, with Harune in the end selecting the then fairly new AK-47 as his rifle, and an M-1911 as his sidearm.

This proved to be a great bonding experience for Kyle and Harune, and triggered something in Kyle. A sort of life flashing before his eyes. A life in which he perhaps wasn't as attentive a parent as he might be. It filled him with a moment of sadness, and then a resolve never to actualize it, not that he was truly at risk. It also filled him with an urge to write a cautionary song. He hadn't written a song of any kind in a while, and the one he composed became the following number.

My child arrived just the other day
He came to the world in the usual way
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay
He learned to walk while I was away
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew
He'd say; "I'm gonna be like you, Dad"
"You know I'm gonna be like you."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little Boy Blue and The Man in the Moon
"When you coming home Dad?"
"I don't know when."
But we'll get together then
You know we'll have a good time then

My son turned 10 just the other day
He said, thanks for the ball Dad, come on let's play
Can you teach me to throw?
I said not today, I've got a lot do, he said that's okay

And he, he walked away, but his smile never dimmed
It said "I'm gonna be like him, yeah."
You know I'm gonna be like him

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little Boy Blue and The Man in the Moon
"When you coming home Dad?"
"I don't know when."
But we'll get together then
You know we'll have a good time then

Well, he came from college just the other day
So much like a man I just had to say
Son, I'm proud of you, can you sit for a while?
He shook his head, and he said with a smile
What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys
See you later, can I have them please?

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon
"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"
But we'll get together then, dad
You know we'll have a good time then

I've long since retired, my son's moved away
I called him up just the other day
I said, I'd like to see you if you don't mind
He said, I'd love to, dad, if I can find the time
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kids have the flu
But it's sure nice talking to you, dad
It's been sure nice talking to you
And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me

He'd grown up just like me
My boy was just like me

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon
"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"
But we'll get together then, dad
We're gonna have a good time then

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man in the moon
"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when"
But we'll get together then, dad

We're gonna have a good time then!

Author's note: once again, a very emotional chapter for myself. I chose this Cuba interlude to give the reader a taste of one of Kyle's "normal" missions, as my usual practice has been to show missions which were life changing in some way. I also did it to properly introduce Fort Worden. Fort Worden is now a park, and the buildings I've described are still extant, including dormant portal frames, and as such, photographs of them may be found on your preferred search engine (e.g. Battery Kinzie, Memory's Vault).

Chapter 6

The very morning after receiving his guns, Harune was scheduled to go on the first mission where he'd leave the ship, and Kyle decided to accompany him. For that reason, he went to Kommandant Kassner's office, to beg if necessary.

Kommandant Kassner was in her office, as she seemed to always be these days. Kyle was seeing very little of her on recent missions, and so far he'd never asked her for anything. Kyle entered her office after knocking and understood the reason why she'd been absent; Kommandant Kassner was heavily pregnant.

Kassner: "Afternoon Kyle. Did you need something?"

Kyle: "Afternoon Sir. Congratulations. And yes, I need something."

Kassner: "Well as I always say; tomorrow doesn't exist."

Kyle: "Indeed not Sir. My son is being deployed today. Harune Arasaka. Do you know him?"

Kassner: "Well I can't say as I do. Why?"

Kyle: "Well I wish to accompany him on his mission. If you have any objections Sir then I'd remind you that I-"

Kyle was cut off by Kassner throwing back her head to laugh.

Kassner: "Quit being so uptight, Kyle. If I'd said no, you'd have no choice anyway."

Kyle: "So you're saying no, Sir?"

Kassner: "Kyle, you're good, but you're not exactly indispensable. I'll live without you for a day. In case you hadn't noticed, there's thousands of other soldiers here. Be with your boy. Dismissed."

Kyle smiled, turned, and left. Apparently it was just that easy. Kyle then walked to the elevator and rode down to the gate room, finding Harune already geared up beneath the Edelweiss, along with perhaps eight other soldiers, with protective gear having apparently been deemed unnecessary for this mission, whatever it was. Kyle walked up to David Steinel. As the Edelweiss captain, he would know where the mission was headed, Kyle supposed.

Kyle: "Where are we headed? What's the mission?"

David: "Iran. Actually, we're going to test Harune a bit. He's going to secure the gate in the cage. Tough one too, it's a jumping gate."

Kyle: "Is he ready for that?"

David smiled enigmatically.

David: "He's ready for a lot more than that, Kyle."

Up until this point, not only had Kyle not been included in Harune's training, but Harune had been specifically ordered not to speak of it. Apparently, he'd come a good deal farther than Kyle had imagined.

Soon enough, the Edelweiss began loading, and the gate opened. Aside from the soldiers, there was the magnetic box contraption, or "cage," on board, at the back of the ship. This was normally brought on the backup ship. Or perhaps today the Edelweiss was the backup ship. While the other ship (called the "Kamille") was parked above as usual, it wasn't uncommon for the backup ship to leave only after the initial one had arrived, for more efficiency or something to that effect.

A quick term explanation is likely necessary, before I continue. As David had said, this mission was to secure a "jumping gate." A "jumping gate" is a particular type of naturally occurring stargate which "jumps" frequently, moving around on a constant basis, usually inside of a radius of a few

miles. These stargates tend not to endure for more than a few days, however some have been known to last for decades, and as ever, how precisely they work is not truly understood.

The Edelweiss flew through the gate, ending up in a vast desert with massive mountains all around. Franz switched on his comms unit and began to instruct.

“Alright Ladies! Harune here is going to show us what he can do. You’re all to keep him alive! Understood?” Franz barked.

“Yes Sir! Sieg Heil!” shouted the crew in unison.

The ship began to hover, and the ramp lowered, allowing the assets to alight. They did so, and several were alarmed when the ship began taking off again.

“Where the fuck is he going?” demanded one soldier, a young gent with the surname of Messing.

“It’s protocol for a jumping gate,” Harune explained. “He can’t be stationary. What if half the ship wound up in the gate when it closed? We’d be down half a ship.”

It was a bit strange, Harune speaking with at least some bit of authority over this young man, as though he were already a sergeant. Kyle smiled with pride at this sight, thinking and seeing that, beneath Harune’s shy exterior, there lurked a soldier ripe for a soldier’s work.

“Alright!” Kyle said, taking charge. “Let’s find the gate. Use your scopes to scan.”

“I already see it,” Harune said.

“What?” asked one soldier. “It’s not anywhere in line of sight.”

“No,” Harune said, “it’s behind that big rock over there. I see it in my mind.”

The soldiers stared at Harune as if they’d never heard of remote viewing. (Or, as it was in that era called, “nonlinear sight.”) They all turned to look where he pointed. This part of

the desert was rather jagged, with many large rocks jutting from the ground, some forming small cliffs. Harune was pointing to one of these.

“You heard the man! Move your asses!” Kyle barked.

The soldiers obeyed this order, beginning to march toward the rock which Harune pointed towards.

“You little bastard, I didn’t know you could do that,” Kyle whispered playfully into Harune’s ear, and Harune giggled.

“I’ll stay here. I have to have my eyes closed to track the gate,” Harune said.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Kyle replied decisively, “you’ll hold onto me. I’ll have to be your guide dog.”

Harune giggled at this again and took Kyle’s hand. They followed the soldiers in rounding the rock, seeing that the gate was just where Harune had predicted it would be. The only problem was, the gate was 30 feet off the ground, and partially fused in the rock.

“I can’t cage it while it’s there. The cage will be fused into the rock. Have to wait until it jumps again,” Harune said.

And so the soldiers waited for several minutes. At one point, Kyle had the idea of attempting to move the gate with telekinesis, and much to his surprise, it began to move, if ever so slightly. Kyle could only describe it as “slippery,” however, and soon enough, the gate jumped again. At this development, Harune closed his eyes and located the gate again.

This wound up repeating several times, as this gate seemed in some way attracted or magnetized to the local cliff, and so was prone to lodging itself in it. Eventually however, the gate appeared on flat ground, its edges not touching the ground or any outcrop.

A smile spread across Harune’s face, and he instructed all to stand back, then closed his eyes and one fist. Just a few seconds

later, Harune opened both, and beneath the gate appeared the bottom part of the magnetic box. Everyone turned to stare at Harune, who slightly smiled, and then once again closed his fist and eyes, opening them again a few seconds later, with the top of the cage in place. The gate was contained.

“Holy shit! Look at this kid!” one of the soldiers shouted.

“Wahoo!” shouted another, running over and picking Harune up by the armpits and holding him to the sun.

“Put me down, asshole. You already knew I could do it,” Harune said, laughing and swatting at the arms which had raised him, which belonged to a Scottish lad called McCullough.

McCullough put Harune down, and Kyle recovered himself from the momentary shock enough to telepathically ping David Steinel that the gate had been secured. He then approached Harune.

“Little Boy Blue,” Kyle said, “I’m proud of you, but I’d like to know something; how?”

“I don’t know,” Harune said earnestly. “I just see something and pull it to where I want it to be.”

Kyle patted Harune on the shoulder, sparing Harune the embarrassment of being hugged in front of his friend, and the Edelweiss landed, its back end towards the caged gate. The loading ramp lowered, and David came bounding out.

“Magnificent. Fucking magnificent!” David kept exclaiming when he saw the caged gate. “Harune, I’m taking you to dinner. You can have anything you want!”

With telekinesis, Kyle lifted the cage and gate onto the Edelweiss, then the soldiers loaded on, and as usual, the Edelweiss flew through the big gate back to Cheyenne Mountain.

“Alright gents,” David announced as the Edelweiss docked, “we have the honor today of delivering the gate. But you all

smell like you've been running around in the desert for hours. Hit the showers and be back at the dock in 10. Sieg Heil!"

"Yes Sir! Sieg Heil!" echoed the soldiers, and they began hurriedly unloading from the Edelweiss.

At the back of the hangar bay was a door which led to some communal showers, which the soldiers all used as rapidly as they could. They put their same fatigues back on, as these were in fact lined with a very thin fabric which repelled sweat, requiring less frequent washing than normal clothing. Kyle, Harune, and the remaining soldiers returned to the loading bay, finding that the gate had somehow been lowered down to the floor of the loading bay, still in the cage.

A moment later, a large floating platform was brought in by several soldiers, and without having to be asked, Kyle lifted the caged gate upward via telekinesis, placing it on the floating platform.

"Alright," David said briskly, having reemerged from somewhere, "let's get this shit delivered."

In spite of its huge size and weighing hundreds of pounds, the levitating platform made pushing the caged gate very simple, and a couple of the soldiers did so, while Kyle, David, and Harune walked in front of the procession.

Kyle: "Where are we taking this thing anyway?"

David: "Titan, to not put too fine a point on it."

Harune: "Where is Titan?"

David: "It's a moon of Saturn. Terrible place really."

Kyle: "How terrible?"

David: "You won't get to see enough to know."

The soldiers, with the gate in tow, walked through the massive Cheyenne Mountain Stargate into a room that, at first glance, looked nearly identical to the one they had just left. This was until one looked up, at which point one saw that the gate

opened into a massive stone frame, much like the one it stood in on the other side, at Cheyenne Mountain. The gate towered to its full 500 feet at the center of a circular room. A panopticon of sorts, as the surrounding circular area was really more of a light well, with level after level after level of circular balconies looking out onto the stargate.

Overlooking the panopticon were hundreds upon hundreds of glass fronted rooms. Through most of them, one could see the unmistakable, fluctuating glow of a large blob of light. Gates. Hundreds and hundreds of gates, all contained in this facility.

The group stopped just on the other side of the gate, with some staring in wonderment at their surroundings, the rest standing and tapping their feet. They remained this way for several minutes, until they heard the soft yet unmistakable tap-tapping of patent leather soles on smooth concrete. They looked up to see about a dozen smartly dressed scientists approaching them, glass pads in hand, their Armani suits and Chanel business dresses covered by long white labcoats.

“Labcoats,” Kyle thought, stiffening and standing up straight. “Always more fucking labcoats.”

“We have a new gate, as promised?” the scientist leading the others asked. The blue embroidery on his labcoat read “Dr. J. Neumann.”

Dr. Neumann, in spite of his no doubt serious job title, was very comical to look at, being rather short, with bright white skin, a glistening bald head, and enormous black glasses.

“He looks like a bleached ant,” Harune said telepathically to Kyle and David, who both had to somehow stop themselves from doubling over with laughter.

“I heard that, young man. I’ll have to teach you some better insults,” Dr. Neumann said aloud, with a smile directed at Harune.

David recovered his poise very quickly and stepped forward, his hand outstretched to Dr. Neumann.

David: "You certainly will, Johan. The boy captured the gate today, you'll be seeing a lot more of him."

Dr. Neumann: "Indeed? Well, I look forward to reading the reports. You know where the reports are, Hauptmann Steinel."

David: "Of course."

Neumann and the other assorted labcoats then crowded around the caged gate, pushing it forward to a set of large double doors directly in front of the stargate, while David turned back to the group. He led them to another, smaller hallway off the side of the gate room. This hallway was lined with narrow doors with hardly any space between them.

David opened one of these rooms, revealing that each one was a tiny room, no bigger than a public bathroom stall. In each one was a tiny low lying desk with a computer atop.

"Everyone take a room. File your reports for today's op, be out in 10 minutes," David instructed.

Kyle entered one of the cubicles and sat at the computer, scanning his Cheyenne Mountain ID card in the little slot allotted to do so. Immediately, the usual post-mission report form appeared on screen. As I've never described reports of this sort before, I'll do so now.

The report system within the Stargate Program was fairly simple, and structured rather like a questionnaire. After a few screens on which the asset would enter their name, they were presented with a scrollable list of questions regarding the mission, such as which assets were involved, what was the location, were hostiles engaged, etcetera.

Kyle had filled out one of these forms after every mission during his time in the Stargate Program. He paused, however,

when he reached the question; “What was the method of capture?”

“The gate cage was pulled in remotely via psionic capability on the part of Mr. Arasaka,” was what Kyle finally wrote.

The term “teleportation” was not in wide use at the time, and at any rate, Kyle didn’t yet know that it was the proper term. Harune’s capabilities and how they worked were still a mystery to him. His report finished, Kyle returned to the hallway, finding that one or two other soldiers had done the same, and not long after, they had all finished their reports and regrouped in the hall.

Kyle: “What happens now?”

David: “We wait to be released back to Colorado.”

“What is this place anyway?” asked one of the soldiers.

“They change the gates here,” David explained. “Put them in portable frames and ship them around so that anyone can use them at any time.”

So, Kyle realized, all those permanent gates which seemed so common must be from this place. Or one like it anyway.

Eventually, one of the scientists they had seen earlier reappeared, this one a tall red haired woman. The embroidery on her labcoat read “Dr. M. Cliff.” She looked at her glass pad and spoke to the group.

“Mr. Arasaka, may I please speak with you in private?” Dr. Cliff asked, in a crisp, no nonsense voice.

“I’m his instructor. What is this about?” David asked, before Harune had a chance to speak.

“Yes, I was hoping you’d come along too,” Dr. Cliff said. “Hauptmann David Steinel? Perhaps you’ll understand some things better than us. The rest of you wait here.”

Kyle chose not to speak, and simply quietly followed as Dr. Cliff, Harune, and David walked away. It wasn’t that Kyle was

distrustful. He knew by now that David Steinel loved Harune and considered himself Harune's second father, and Harune reciprocated. And in any case, this didn't seem a situation where Harune would be mistreated in any way. However, Kyle was tired of not knowing of Harune's capabilities and training.

The group, with Dr. Cliff in front, walked to another door coming off the ground floor surrounding the gate, then up a longish flight of stairs which emerged on the second level of the panopticon. Here, Kyle finally got a good look at the gate containment function of the base.

Each gate was contained in a large room, with a window. These rooms were lined with black rock, containing magnetic properties, Kyle guessed. He also supposed the windows were not truly glass, but some sort of crystal. Each room also had an ample roll up door, enough to bring in a caged gate, remove the cage, and leave the gate in the room.

All the gates Kyle saw on this level still looked as they did in the field, that is to say, still large, constantly fluctuating blobs of white or blue light. There was no sign of the portable frames which these gates could apparently be forced into.

The group, headed by Dr. Cliff, rounded the level of the panopticon a good ways, before turning towards one of the many hallways which branched off between the gate rooms. This hallway, like all the others, was all concrete and completely unmarked. Kyle wondered if this was perhaps to create confusion on behalf of someone or something breaching a gate. In any event, Dr. Cliff arrived at one of the doors coming off this hallway and opened it, showing the group inside.

Beyond the door was a large concrete room, with a single long table with folding chairs behind it. A single folding chair stood in front of the table, and behind it, sat the dozen or so scientists who had first greeted the unit on arrival at the facility. Dr. Cliff

rounded the table, seated herself, then gestured for Harune to take the seat at the front of the table, facing the scientists. Kyle and David were instructed to approach and stand either side of Harune. At last, Dr. Neumann turned his attention to his glass pad and addressed Harune.

Dr. Neumann: "Mr. Arasaka, thank you for coming in today. You've done well. If these reports are to be believed, you've done something only occasionally ever documented."

Harune: "I'm glad to be here. Do you have to talk like a fucking movie character?"

Kyle thought about telling Harune to clean up his language, then decided against it. If it made the labcoats squirm, so be it. It didn't, although one of them did turn a bit pink. The meeting continued.

Dr. Neumann: "Mr. Arasaka, according to the reports everyone turned in, you somehow remotely transported the gate's cage and trapped the gate, all by yourself. And what I want to know is, is that correct, Mr. Arasaka?"

Harune: "Yes."

The panel of scientists paused for a moment, as if trying to calculate their next line of conversation.

Dr. Neumann: "Yes. And our next question is, how? There have only been a few documented cases of this capability in humans. And we checked your blood files, you're 100% human."

Harune: "I just..... do it. I see it, and then it happens."

Kyle: "If I may speak--"

Dr. Neumann: "You may not, Herr Dellschau, as you were not even invited. Now--"

At that moment, Dr. Neumann turned his attention down to his glass pad, only to find that his glasses had vanished like magic off his face. Kyle and David looked at each other, both beaming with fatherly pride.

“Where are my glasses? Where the fuck are my glasses?” Dr. Neumann demanded, pawing at his face, front, and lap in vain for his glasses.

Harune rose from his chair, holding up the good doctor’s glasses like a hard won trophy.

“Did you lose something Doctor?” Harune asked, an impish grin on his face.

A series of gasps and exclamations and small ovations went up and down the table of scientists, and after a moment, Dr. Neumann held out his hand and beckoned, expecting Harune to walk over with the glasses. But that wasn’t Harune’s style. Harune simply released the glasses from his grip, and instantly, they reappeared in Dr. Neumann’s open hand. Dr. Neumann simply stared at them for a moment, then at last put them back on. Harune reseated himself for the panel to continue. Kyle set an affectionate hand on Harune’s shoulder.

“Steinel! What are you training this boy for exactly?” asked one of the scientists, a young man with prematurely gray hair.

“He’s to become a pilot. He is my sole trainee, selected after his ability was discovered in a muted capacity,” David said, obviously choosing his words very carefully.

“And how is he shaping up for this profession?” Dr. Cliff demanded.

“Well,” David said after a pause, “he’s shaping up very well. I don’t wish to stroke his ego, but I must say that after he completes his training in a few short months, he’ll be the best pilot I’ve ever had the luck to train. And not much longer after that, he’ll be the best I have ever seen.”

“This boy is no pilot,” Dr. Neumann said with a shake of his head, more to himself than anyone else.

“What is he, then?” Kyle asked, at last unable to contain himself.

This prompted another pause. Rather than answering, Dr. Neumann decided to continue questioning.

Dr. Neumann: “Steinel, did you know the boy had these capabilities to such an extent?”

David: “I suspected. Hence why I deployed him today. It was a test, which all good instructors subject their trainees to.”

Dr. Neumann: “Your work and judgment aren’t on trial here, Steinel. But there is much to consider now. Thank you for coming in, Mr. Arasaka.”

And with that, Harune, David, and Kyle were apparently dismissed. One of the scientists rounded the table and led them out of the room, back to the panopticon. Here, they saw that the gate had been reopened, and the soldiers they’d come with were grouping around it impatiently.

“Attention, Men!” David barked sharply as he approached, and they all stood to attention, including Kyle and Harune, and marched through the gate, returning to Cheyenne Mountain.

“Harune, you’re dismissed for the day,” David said upon reemerging through the gate. “I have things to do. Go be with your dad.”

As it turned out, this was to be the end of Kyle and family’s time at Cheyenne Mountain Complex, though in an odd way, Kyle had been seeing the writing on the wall for some time. They’d been too unbothered for too long. Not to mention that in general, the placement of Project Phoenix assets was never to be permanent. Transfers were already common. The Flynns and Tsurabaya had already been transferred by that point.

It was the evening after the mission just recounted, and Kyle was in the kitchen of the apartment, cooking dinner. Now that the program heads saw fit to deliver ingredients rather than meals, Kyle was trying, without a great deal of success, to master the art of cooking meat and vegetables Hong Kong style,

inspired by the trips he'd made there with the boys. He was in the midst of doing so when there was a knock at the apartment door.

"Someone watch the beef!" Kyle shouted, turning down the heat and heading for the door. He opened it to find both David Steinel and a thoroughly unannounced guest.

"Georg!" Kyle exclaimed. "How very unexpected! Come in, I'll see if I can find some extra plates. Boys! Come out, we have guests!"

Save from the usual video calls via glass pad, Kyle hadn't seen his oldest friend since leaving Camp Hero. The men hugged, and Georg and David entered the apartment.

"Uncle Georg!" Max shouted, upon exiting the bedroom he and Harune shared, while Harune rushed to the kitchen to tend to the food.

David pulled Kyle aside a bit into the living room, at the same time opening his jacket to pull out a packet of paperwork.

David: "I'm sorry, Kyle. I did everything I could. You and the boys are being transferred."

Kyle: "Why?"

David: "The powers that be, including your father, feel that Harune is being underutilized here and—"

Kyle: "He's not my father. And cut the horseshit."

David: "There's no horseshit. They think Harune would be better off in an exploratory position, at Fort Worden. Your friend showing up today is a coincidence, or so I'm led to believe."

Kyle: "He's going to be devastated. Stay for dinner. We'll tell him after."

"I can hear you," Harune's voice said at Kyle's elbow.

Kyle and David glanced at each other a bit helplessly, and then with resolve, though fighting back tears, knelt down to be at Harune's level.

David: "Harune, I want you to understand something. You're leaving for now, but I'll always be your first commanding officer. You never forget your first."

Harune: "Yes. I know you will, Sir."

David: "And I'll always be your friend. For as long as I draw breath. Do you understand me, Soldier?"

Harune: "Yes Sir."

David: "And anyway, there are permanent gates. We'll see each other when we have time."

David withdrew to his full height and gave a hearty Roman salute, and Harune reciprocated. The three stood and talked for a few minutes making holiday plans, before Georg and Max emerged from the kitchen, saying that dinner was ready, if a bit worse for the wear, and Harune went to help set the table. At this, David quietly left, likely not wishing to drag out the goodbye.

Kyle, Georg, and the boys then managed to enjoy a very pleasant, if questionably cooked, dinner. Afterwards, Kyle ordered the boys to go to bed, then he and Georg sat on the couch with a bottle of brandy to discuss what came next.

Kyle: "My friend, as I always seem to say, what is this about? My transfer to Fort Worden?"

Georg: "No. This is about something much bigger. The Old Man needs you rather urgently. On Ceradus. Jack will be picking up the boys for Fort Worden tomorrow. I'm to take you to Ceradus."

Kyle: "I was beginning to wonder if The Old Man remembered I existed. What are we doing on Ceradus?"

And so, Georg explained it. By the end of it, it was very obvious that even without Harune's capabilities, Kyle and the boys leaving Cheyenne Mountain would have been inevitable.

What they discussed, and what occurred next, is a subject for the next chapter.

Author's note. Well, Kyle's time at Cheyenne Mountain has drawn to a close, perhaps as abruptly for the reader as for Kyle himself. In all, it lasted about 18 months. While it was a very emotionally significant time for Kyle and the boys, I cannot pretend that it was terribly important for Kyle's career. Thus, having told the essence of the program, we are moving forward.

Chapter 7

Before continuing with what happened to Kyle next, I had best discuss what Georg revealed to Kyle.

According to Georg, Emmermann was involved in a very large and apparently quite important dig on a desert planet somewhere in the constellation Grus. This planet was considered the Breakaway's capital of archaeology as, it was thought, it had once been the capital of the Progenitor race's empire. Emmermann's involvement in such a place was unsurprising. However, what was surprising was what Emmermann's team had stumbled across.

At some point in the dig, Emmermann's crew had discovered a subterranean crater, several miles in diameter, filled in with a thick blue solution, which was apparently some type of stasis gel. Within this gel was, among other things, a fairly large ship of outwardly typical design.

The illusion created by this ship's seeming lack of distinction was quickly shattered when it was found that the ship did not have any sort of door, at least none that was obvious. However, when someone had given the order to cut into the ship, a loading ramp had instantly opened, indicating that the ship had heard this order and was protecting itself from sustaining hull damage, as if this would have caused it some type of pain.

A team had then approached the ship, including Emmermann, who said he'd felt a "strong welcoming sensation" from the ship, and that it was calling him. He was the only one, as all others present had felt an overwhelming sense of terror and desire to flee. They'd resisted, and five brave souls had

attempted to enter the ship alongside Emmermann. Nonetheless, the ship was not interested in this.

Two of the individuals entering the ship with Emmermann had fallen over dead, according to the data from the on-site regeneration tank, having had massive strokes. The other three had fled into the desert screaming, and when they'd been asked why once they were apprehended, they claimed to have heard the voices of their dead relatives telling them to do so.

This hostility still did not apply to Emmermann, however, and he'd been not only allowed, but encouraged to head deeper into the ship. He'd found himself face to face with what was apparently the mainframe of the ship's AI, which had made a few things clear.

The first thing the AI (which considered itself female) had explained was that she was, to the best of her knowledge, the last member of her kind, since her sealing away 12,000 Ceradean years prior. She'd also asserted that not only could she scan, completely and utterly, the consciousness of anyone who approached her within a certain radius, but also the consciousnesses of every person they'd ever come into contact with.

This, ultimately, was why she had allowed Emmermann to enter her, because she had scanned the entirety of his consciousness, and had found Kyle. The AI had made one thing clear; while she knew that Emmermann, through military power, may own her, she was selecting Kyle to be her captain, so that none of her systems would operate for anyone but him. She had then ordered Emmermann off the ship, which he'd been powerless to refuse, and the ship had sealed behind him.

Emmermann, with hardly any thought, had decided to follow the ship's wishes, and had thus ordered Georg (apparently also on-site) to bring Kyle to the site on Ceradus immediately, and this was why Georg had arrived at Cheyenne Mountain.

Georg stayed the night in the Dellschau family apartment, then helped Kyle, Max, and Harune to pack their belongings. They didn't have many. Aside from the street clothes which they decided to bring, anticipating that they'd be given uniforms anyway, their only other possessions which seemed worth packing were a few books and comic books, as well as the family camera and all their photographs.

Max and Harune didn't complain. It wasn't their nature. However, Kyle could tell that Max considered the move a step in the wrong direction, and that Harune was devastated. Kyle himself wasn't relishing it much, because while he was looking forward to seeing the Flynns and Tsurabaya again, who had transferred about two months earlier, he was mistrustful of a change in assignment. This was compounded by the fact that he had the vaguest sense that the Long Island AI was displeased. But these were his orders, and he had no recourse.

Kyle and the boys packed, then had a rather heavy breakfast. They weren't sure when they'd eat next, or what the meals were like at Fort Worden. Not long after, Jack arrived, and after the usual greetings, he left with the boys, taking Kyle's bag as well, as Georg assured Kyle that he'd be receiving clothes on Ceradus.

Jack and the boys went through the permanent opening to Fort Worden, the same one Kyle had used when delivering the alien blood from Cuba. Kyle and Georg went through another permanent portal. They found themselves on a beach, on a planet that Kyle didn't bother to ask the name of, as one of Emmermann's usual asset transport ships was already waiting for them, and they boarded immediately. Laid out on one of the benches were a pair of sand colored full body suits.

"Desert suits," Georg explained. "They force your piss and sweat back into your body, so you don't get dehydrated."

Even as the ship's door began to close, Kyle and Georg began changing into the suits, which proved different from the smart-suits Kyle had experienced before. These desert suits were loose fitting, had a zipper along the back for ease of entry, and they covered the entire body, including the head, save for eye holes and feet. The suits were lined with a black material, a very smooth and quite comfortable one, which was fortunate, as nearly every inch of the body was covered with it, since one couldn't wear a stitch under the suit.

The eyes were covered with large goggles, also provided, and black boots which were worn without socks and had the legs of the suit tuck into them. According to Georg, this system worked so that the wearer of the suit would only lose about 1/8th of a teaspoon of water for every 16 hours of wear, even if those hours were all spent hiking through the desert.

As he had no need for the nutrients provided by water, Kyle had no real need for the suit. However, had he not worn one, he would have stood out. Either Emmermann had anticipated this and ordered the suit anyway, so that there was no friction on-site, or perhaps Georg had anticipated the same, and had ordered the suit to spare Kyle any humiliation. Kyle chose to be grateful and not ask questions.

Kyle and Georg were so used to having to rapidly change clothes that they'd already been suited up by the time the ship arrived in orbit of Ceradus. Kyle turned and looked out of the ship's little slat "window," at last being able to take in Ceradus. It was a large, entirely desert planet, though there were variations in the desert environment visible from orbit. Most of the sand was a burnt orange color, however the poles and several decent sized regions were covered in pale yellow sand, and there were a few continent sized swathes of black sand. It was towards an orange area that the ship aimed and descended.

After entering the atmosphere, it became clear that the region was mountainous and heavily plateaued. It reminded Kyle of the portion of the Iranian desert he had been in just the day before. The ship lowered and landed near a large, mostly canvas encampment in what appeared to have once been the bed of a lake, in a long forgotten era. Kyle caught a glimpse of what he imagined was the ship he'd come for, but it was too brief to get much of an impression.

Emmermann's ship opened, and Kyle and Georg alighted, to see that a group of people was already approaching them. They were led by Emmermann, recognizable thanks to the glass helmet he wore, rather than the cloth one included in the other suits. Emmermann quickened his pace and reached Kyle and Georg a bit ahead of the rest.

"Kyle! My boy!" Emmermann exclaimed, extending his hand. "How long has it been?"

"I'm not sure I counted," Kyle said dryly.

"Well, I say too long," Emmermann said, then turned to the group approaching with him.

"I never thought I'd be glad to see you, Mr. Dellschau," a Southern accented woman voiced in one of the suits.

It was, of course, Dr. Ainsley Horton, of The Institute of Investigative Marsology.

"For fuck's sake," Kyle said to himself, then to Dr. Horton; "And why are you glad this time?"

"Because," Dr. Horton said, "when you're the ship's captain, you can order her to let me on board and do my studies."

"Right, then," Georg cut in at last, "Kyle, let's go to the refreshments tent. I already need a cold beer in this heat."

"If it's all the same," Kyle said, "I'd rather get to work."

There were several shrugs, and quite a few groans, but no one objected, and so they all set out towards the ship in question. I suppose this warrants a description.

The ship was all gray on the outside, save for a set of windows on what must have been the bridge. The ship was in three parts; the central body was an elongated irregular hexagon shape. On either side were two cylinders, both slightly longer and taller than the central body. Coming off the top of the central body, on each side, were three flying buttress-like metal arms running between the central body and cylinders, although the body and cylinders were so close together, it was clear they were welded or bolted together in some way. At the back end of the two cylinders were flame grills, indicating that these contained the ship's engines. Kyle estimated that the ship was about 350 feet long by about 150 feet wide by about 25 feet tall, not including the landing gear, which raised it about 12 feet off the ground.

"How do we-" Kyle began.

He was going to say, "get on board with no open doors," but as he was saying it, a ramp dropped from the ship, and Kyle was overcome with an urge to approach. He looked at his companions, and saw that most had stopped right at that moment, except for Georg and Dr. Horton. Just a few steps further and Dr. Horton also stopped, and began crying uncontrollably. The ship was exerting her psionic influence, deterring all except Kyle and Georg from approaching her.

Kyle: "Did she let you approach her before?"

Georg: "No. Maybe she can tell that you trust me."

Kyle and Georg approached the opened loading ramp and began to proceed upwards, only for Georg to stop and relinquish his rifle, tossing it out of the ship in a decidedly panicked fashion. He then looked back at Kyle, a pained yet somehow sheepish look in his hazel eyes.

Kyle, on the other hand, was feeling something else altogether; belonging. This was where he was meant to be. He'd not experienced a feeling like this since his last visit to Mars, though this time he knew he was, at least partially, under influence. However, he knew something else; this ship's wish for him to be her captain was genuine.

In any event, once Georg had discarded his weapon, the men proceeded further into the ship. The ramp, on the inside, was orange and led to a small hangar bay, which was also all orange. Within it were two shuttles, each about 12 feet tall by about 20 feet long and boxy, save for the rounded front ends which were all glass, allowing one to see inside them. Inside, there was a single pilot's seat, with a console in front which looked rather like one on a standard airplane, and in the back were two long benches arranged like those of a subway car. The height of the benches, pilot's seats, and ceilings of the shuttles indicated they had been built for a humanoid species which was a good deal taller than those on Earth.

At the back of the hangar bay, which was lit by some unseen source, one could see the end of a metal staircase leading up into the remainder of the ship. Kyle and Georg proceeded up it. The walk was fairly short, and ended in a long hallway, which Kyle estimated ran the full length of the ship's central body. The hallway was arched and of dark gray metal, save for the occasional doorways, which were orange. The floor was glass that covered slab after slab of some type of glowing white crystal, which lit the hallway entirely. Kyle supposed there must be another level below, as the hangar bay was not large enough to take up all the space below this hallway.

"Turn around and open the fourth doorway on the left," an ethereal feminine voice said to Kyle, telepathically.

Kyle somehow managed to contain his momentary shock, and went to the fourth doorway as instructed. This door was metal, orange, and the sliding type, like all the others. It slid open automatically upon Kyle's approach, revealing a tiny room, with a ladder leading down to a lower level. A look down showed that it led to an all white room, the contents of which were not visible from the upper portion.

"She only wants me to descend," Kyle said to Georg, who simply nodded.

Kyle descended the ladder, then paused and readied himself for whatever might be in the room before turning around. At last, he turned around to see that the room was circular and fairly small, about 12 feet in diameter. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all of the same lightly glowing white crystal as the floor of the hallway above. In the center of the room, rising until it blended into both floor and ceiling, was a glass cylinder. In the center of the cylinder was a red sphere, perhaps six feet in circumference, which Kyle, with a resigned shrug, approached.

It would be difficult, if not altogether impossible, to describe conventionally the "conversation" which came next. It was full contact telepathy, much like that experienced by way of the Long Island AI, with one notable exception; this AI was unquestionably benevolent. Her actions up to this point had been in self-defense, and now that Kyle had arrived, she was showing her true self to him.

Aside from Kyle being the captain of her vessel, the AI asked him for only two things; an engineer to tend to her damaged engines, and a name. According to the AI, she came from a culture in which it was customary for captains to name their ships, and by extension their AIs, or as she preferred to be known, "ship's mind."

As soon as Kyle was asked for the name, one came into his head almost immediately; Prometheus. The creator of human life and bringer of civilization and life. A regal name for a regal Entity.

Kyle walked away from the interaction knowing that he'd found something very rare indeed; loyalty. He'd only truly found it in a few people he'd met and known over the course of his life. Georg, Jack, and Norma Jean, for instance, he had known would always have his back, and Kyle would have theirs. Now, Kyle knew that Prometheus would always have his back, and he'd have hers. As her captain, it was his solemn and happy duty.

Kyle bounded off the ship, the ramp of the loading bay having been reopened, and upon failing to find Georg, he sprinted off towards the encampment. As he did so, he ripped off his goggles and tore the head covering part of his suit. Fuck the consequences, he'd decided. He was in the mood to feel the air of the planet.

By now, the massive red sun which Ceradus orbited was beginning to set. Kyle reached the encampment in just a few minutes, priming for a few things. First and foremost, he planned to find an engineer, as Prometheus had requested. After that, it was a drink with Georg and sex with a woman. He imagined Emmermann had stocked the camp, and that one of the tents was a movable brothel. Upon his arrival at the encampment, Kyle saw that the majority of the personnel were inside one large tent, which he then decidedly burst his way into.

"She needs an engineer!" Kyle shouted triumphantly, deciding that subtlety and introductions were for cowards.

Directly next to the opening flap of the canvas tent was a large round table, at which sat Emmermann, Georg, and a group of other people Kyle was quite certain he'd never seen before. These persons wore dig clothes. Kyle guessed they were ordinary

workers whom Emmermann had specially selected to have the privilege of eating with him. Kyle had to admit; The Old Man had charisma. Kyle smiled slightly when he saw Dr. Horton seated at one of the many other tables, staring jealously at Emmermann's table. He rose at Kyle's arrival.

"The hero returns!" Emmermann exclaimed, rising from his seat.

"Bring another chair to my table," Emmermann added to one of the waitstaff moving to and fro in the tent, which was apparently a rather fancy canteen.

Another chair was found practically instantly. Emmermann might be charismatic, but that didn't change the fact that failure to obey an order of his was an instant death sentence. Kyle was seated directly next to Emmermann, with Georg on Emmermann's other side. At Kyle's other side was a young brunette, one of the dig workers, and Kyle decided to make her his next conquest.

"How do you do? Kyle Dellschau," Kyle said, extending her his hand.

"Clara McHune," the pert brunette said, taking Kyle's hand. "I hear you need an engineer?"

Kyle: "Indeed. Or rather my ship does."

It was the first time Kyle had referred to Prometheus as "my ship." It felt good, he decided.

Clara: "I'm an engineer. I make the equipment here work. Although I think you're a bit advanced."

Kyle: "Enlighten me?"

Clara: "Well I've heard about you. You're a tin man, but a very expensive one. Thank you for making the ship quiet down, by the way. I've been dying to poke around in there."

Instantly, the feeling in Kyle's crotch dissipated, at least as far as Ms. Clara McHune was concerned. He switched to a businesslike manner.

Kyle: "I see. Well the ship is a she, not an it, and I'll have to see if she'll allow you on board at all."

Kyle then turned away from Clara, to see that Emmermann had been observing all along, his thick gray eyebrows raised, slowly chewing his steak.

"Kyle, if you want a woman, I'll send you one after dinner," Emmermann said in a low voice. Kyle couldn't help but chuckle and nod slightly.

Emmermann then turned his attention to the table at large, saying that Kyle wished to tell everyone "the story of how he'd tamed the savage beast." Kyle, of course, had no desire to do this. But Kyle did his best, and everyone at the table seemed suitably awed.

After dinner, a bar was brought into the tent, and most of the tables cleared. Kyle had several drinks, and eventually, drifted towards the little tent he'd been assigned to, under directions from Georg.

It was not long after, as he was sitting in his tent, that Kyle heard the distinctive tapping of a slight woman's feet on the packed sand of the encampment. This area of tents was all men, but as usual, Emmermann was seeing that his staff were kept satisfied, and he'd promised after several drinks to send Kyle "the best." The flap of Kyle's tent opened a bit, and the head of a young Japanese woman peeked in.

"I'm Yumi. Emmermann-Sama said you might like to have time with me?" the young woman said.

Kyle stood, unzipping and stepping out of his desert suit as he did, so that he was fully naked in an instant. Once nude, Kyle walked towards the woman, beckoning her into the tent.

“He is correct,” Kyle said.

Kyle then had a very good, if not altogether relaxing, night with Yumi, which I will leave to the reader’s imagination, save to say that Emmermann was certainly not exaggerating when he’d promised that he’d send Kyle “the best.” So good was the reward that it almost made Kyle concerned. Just why had this assignment meant so much to Emmermann, anyway?

The morning came after about eight hours, by Kyle’s estimation. Ceradus was a fairly small planet, orbiting closely to a very large star, and so it spun fast, resulting in light gravity and short days. Yumi rose, and so did Kyle. After one last pleasurable interlude, Yumi left, and Kyle donned his desert suit to greet the day.

The sunrise was beautiful, almost impossibly red, with neon yellow streaks in the sky. Just outside Kyle’s tent, a tiny rodent scampered across the ground and then vanished into the ground. It was the first sign of indigenous life on Ceradus that Kyle had seen.

Kyle set towards the perimeter of the encampment, finding that a number of personnel were already gathering, including Dr. Horton, glass pad in hand, her usual gaggle of hangers-on, as well as a number of people with what looked to be engineering equipment. Dr. Horton and company approached Kyle, who stiffened, but when she spoke, she was respectful, for the first time that Kyle had seen.

“Kyle,” Dr. Horton said, using his given name for the first time in his life, “I’m afraid I need your help.”

“I’d thought you might say that,” Kyle said, lying through his teeth. He’d not expected this in the least.

Dr. Horton: “Kyle, I need to see that ship. I’ll make notes and take photographs, nothing else. Think of what I could learn.”

Kyle: "And think of the money that could be made. I understand, Doctor. I'll see if she will let you on."

Dr. Horton: "Kyle, I'm not--"

Kyle: "No, you're not. But your benefactors are. As I said, I'll see if she'll let you on board. Under my supervision."

Kyle walked towards Prometheus, waving Dr. Horton and crew, as well as the engineers, to follow. Georg ran to the front of the group and walked alongside Kyle the rest of the way. Kyle would only later ruefully think of how they must have looked rather like Moses and Aaron leading the Israelites over the desert.

Prometheus opened her hatch, and Kyle entered, then began to commune with the ship. She would only allow three engineers on board, as well as Dr. Horton and two of her assistants, the latter only under Kyle's strictest supervision. Under these circumstances, Kyle finally saw all of the inside of Prometheus. It now falls on me to describe her.

Prometheus had a bridge, as one would expect, at her front end. This was a gray room with large windows overlooking the outside. At the center, on an elevated platform, was a very large brown leather chair with a joystick-like device built into one arm, with a computer console of some kind in front of it, within easy reach. This was obviously the captain's chair. The characters on the keys were in a language not found even within Kyle's database. Along the edges of the room, underneath the windows, were other consoles with slightly smaller gray chairs, still upholstered with whatever leather like material was on the captain's chair.

The rest of the upper level had mostly dormitory style living rooms, with no beds included, though there were bunk frames which had obviously been built for individuals 10 to 12 feet in height, as had the rest of the ship, judging by proportions. At

the back of the upper level was a very generous sitting area with couches and chairs, the walls, dark gray and the furniture, brown. Kyle decided Prometheus needed a paint job when it was convenient, and she agreed. The upper level also had two rooms containing long troughs with vented bottoms which Prometheus informed him were toilets.

The lower level was smaller than the upper one, and was accessed through two narrow staircases off the main upper hallway. It consisted of four rooms. One a galley, with a still working refrigerator and what appeared to be a plasma stove, all painted white, one a communal sonic shower area eerily similar to many Kyle had seen, one a room with a single bed frame and shelves which was presumed to be a medical area, and the last one a bar, which was unfortunately totally empty.

In addition to the two shuttles, the loading bay held two things of interest. The first was four tubes, large enough to crawl through, which were sealed by heavy circular doors. Prometheus explained that these were exactly what they appeared to be; torpedo tubes. The torpedo exit doors were in front, and invisible until opened, as the loading bay door had been.

Two more invisible doors also slid open off the sides of the loading bay, at Kyle's command. These allowed access to the cylinder compartments on the sides of the ship. These cylinders were about 90% empty metallic space, and to be used for storage. The back 20 feet or so of each one, however, contained the engine rooms.

Each cylinder had an engine. The engines within, fortunately, were of a principle already understood by Emmermann's engineers. Namely, these were antigravity engines made of spinning cylinders of metal studded with crystal. These crystals were pale orange, and were attached to the spinning belts which

surrounded the room itself, the floor being more of an elevated walkway, so that the belts wouldn't be stepped on. The rooms had in their center a very large crystal, mounted on a metal pedestal. The backs of the engine rooms were the flame grills visible from the outside of the ship.

The belts, the engineers explained, had to be filled with fuel. The contents of this fuel were unknown to Kyle at the time, however the engineers brought cans of it on board and filled the belts via small openings in each one, and Prometheus did not object, nor did she when the large crystals were changed.

When this was all done, which took nearly a week, due to the crystals having to be shipped from somewhere that even Emmermann's tentacles struggled to reach, Prometheus was quite suddenly ready and eager to be flown to wherever Kyle might choose. Emmermann had made arrangements with Fort Worden, and just like that, Kyle was to be back to his old stomping grounds, albeit with Prometheus in tow. The monster stargate, described a few chapters ago, was opened to connect Fort Worden and Ceradus, and it appeared on the edge of the horizon of the archeological encampment.

At last, Kyle sat in the captain's chair. He'd purposely waited for this moment, and now all alone on Prometheus, he at last indulged, and gripped the joystick-like instrument, feeling and seeing as he did that Prometheus was already lifting herself. In this moment, perhaps for the first time in his life, Kyle felt true autonomy.

"Where are we to go, Captain?" Prometheus asked for the first time.

Kyle laughed to keep himself from crying, to limited success. He of course had the boyish urge to say "Nowhere, just fly," but he suppressed this urge.

“Home,” Kyle said simply, then to himself added, “if I knew how to fucking fly.”

“For that short distance, you need only move the stick, Captain,” Prometheus said.

Was it his imagination, or did Kyle detect a note of sarcastic condescension in Prometheus’ “voice”?

In any event, Kyle seized the joystick, and to his surprise, was able to maintain a steady angle as he turned Prometheus eastward and flew her through the monstrous blue portal on the edge of the horizon.

Kyle and the ship emerged at the top edge of the portal, overlooking the ocean and, far far below them, Fort Worden. Kyle angled Prometheus downwards for a better view and held steady there for a moment, before another telepathic “voice” entered into his head.

“Hello Kyle. Park the beast on the beach north of the lighthouse, then find your way to me, we need to talk.” said the “voice,” which Kyle recognized as belonging to Jimmy. So this was where he’d settled.

“Did he just call me a beast, Captain?” Prometheus asked.

“Yes,” Kyle said with a sad chuckle, “I’m afraid he did. Welcome home, Prometheus. Why the fuck did you choose me?”

Author’s note. And so it begins, Kyle’s journeys, trials, and tribulations with his own ship, Prometheus. I apologize if my descriptions of Prometheus’ insides are difficult to envision, but I can assure the reader that however difficult they are to envision, they were a thousand times more difficult to put on paper.

Chapter 8

Kyle tilted Prometheus' joystick in the direction Jimmy had indicated. The maneuver of landing was a good deal more complicated than simply flying in a straight line, and Prometheus had to make several corrections to her angle in order for her to land, but she managed it.

Kyle's question to Prometheus as to why she'd chosen him went unanswered. Either she thought it was sarcastic or in some way rhetorical, or Kyle wouldn't have liked her answer. In any event, Kyle landed Prometheus on the beach near the lighthouse of Puget Sound, and Prometheus said she'd opened the loading bay door so he might leave. Kyle didn't want to, but he rose from the captain's chair, almost as soon as he'd sat in it.

Kyle walked off the ship onto the beach, to find, of all people, Jack Flynn waiting for him, sitting atop a white hovering motorcycle.

"Is it Captain Dellschau, now?" Jack asked teasingly.

"Shut the fuck up," Kyle shot back, "and that had better be my ride."

"You've got a ship, now you want a ride? Give you people an inch and you'll take a mile," Jack said, grinning.

Kyle's eyes narrowed, before he leaned in to hug his old friend, whom he hadn't seen in a number of linear months. Jack then explained that he had indeed been sent to pick Kyle up, under Jimmy's instructions, as Jimmy had a proposal.

As Kyle turned to climb onto the back of Jack's hoverbike, he saw a group of children running up the beach and shouting

delightedly, their eyes on Prometheus. Kyle smiled at this, especially as he saw that Prometheus wasn't rejecting them, though she had closed the loading bay doors, and so the children could do nothing but admire her exterior.

Jack kicked his hoverbike into gear and set off up the beach, back in the direction of the Puget Sound lighthouse and the fort, eventually turning left off the beach towards the cedar forests. They rode through these for a while, and Kyle looked happily at them, glad his boys would live in such a place, with nature so easily accessible.

Eventually, Jack pulled up in front of a tall cylindrical, concrete building, apparently once a watchtower of some kind. Another hoverbike was parked in front, as well as a hovering jeep which Kyle recognized as Jimmy's. As Kyle and Jack clambered off their hoverbike, another jeep pulled up, this one bearing three passengers; The Roths minus Jason, and Samantha Li. Another hoverbike soon showed up, ridden by Danny O'Brien, and then several more vehicles bearing people Kyle didn't recognize, until there were perhaps 15 to 20 individuals. One person explained that this tower contained Jimmy's new office. None could explain why exactly they'd been summoned.

The tower was entered through a single red fireproof door, which opened into a single nondescript concrete room with a few folding chairs. At the far end was another door which stood ajar, revealing a staircase ascending up into the tower. Kyle and the others climbed the staircase, finding that it wound upward through the tower, all the way to the top.

In the top room of the tower, of course, was Jimmy's office. This was a round room, with a metal ceiling, concrete floor, and glass all round the single circular wall, affording a panoptic view of the outside. Jimmy's stately mahogany desk stood slightly off

center, and there were bits and pieces of office furniture about. However, no one seemed interested in sitting.

The previous arrival proved to be Yoshiro Tsurabaya, who was already in the office. Kyle went and greeted Tsurabaya, then commented on his friend's earliness.

"Japanese punctuality, we're notorious for it," Tsurabaya said with a chuckle.

A moment later, one last person came rushing up the stairs, this one being Erik Holtz. At his arrival, Jimmy nodded to himself, then at last chose to address the group at large.

"Right then," Jimmy said, addressing the group in a way that made it clear that what followed was a prepared speech, "I've brought you all here for one reason only; to make some bastards suffer."

A slight murmur went through the crowd, and Jimmy continued. In the intervening years, Kyle struggles to recall in a precise and chronological way all of what Jimmy had said, as do I, so I shall instead summarize it in spirit.

As related in the final chapter of the previous volume, there was a revolution within Project Phoenix, one which necessitated a dispersal of the program and a movement of assets. One outcome of this revolution was that many perpetrators of the abuses against the Project Phoenix children were killed, but many others escaped, including multiple higher-ups, who had directed the abuses against the children of Camp Hero, and overseen the approximately 225,000 deaths which had occurred within the project up until that point.

Thus, a new action had become necessary; hunts for the escaped perpetrators. This would, of course, not be a simple task, nor a fast one, hence why Jimmy had called in a fairly small group of people whom he knew to be dedicated, vengeful, and well enough connected to the Breakaway (where all the escaped

perpetrators had likely fled) without being in any way prominent. These hunts were being distributed, at least at first, among groups of two or three assets who would be sent to execute these perpetrators once they were located.

Jimmy stated that the executions were to be done “by any means necessary.” Weapons were to be acquired on-site, and no reports would be written. Those caught would be unable to seek diplomatic assistance from Project Phoenix.

Only two small pieces of equipment were being issued. The first was a small knife with a plasma blade, which could cut through even the toughest of reinforced bone. The second was what appeared to be an oversized thermos, lined with quartz, through which one could see another layer of magnetic rock.

Jimmy explained this latter device. It was what is known as a “soul container,” designed, as the name would imply, to store a consciousness. These were apparently sourced from an alien race from the star system of Zeta Reticuli. Jimmy also explained something Kyle had never heard before, namely that the human consciousness is stored in the brainstem, and clings to it even after death for a period of time.

The procedure was thus made clear; kill the perpetrator, and then, using the small plasma knife, remove his or her brainstem and place it in the “soul container.” This brain stem would be returned to Fort Worden and destroyed, ensuring that even if the perpetrator’s body was regenerated, their consciousness would be gone, and thus that the person would never cause harm again. What happened to the body after was up to colonial authorities, however as a general rule, it was hardly dignified. In all likelihood, the body would be cannibalized for genetic material, then either sold to Arasaka Robotics to make a synthetic, or sold to one of various alien races as food. An undignified fate worthy of the suffering they’d caused.

“Right then,” Jimmy said at last, turning back to his computer and clicking a few buttons, “I’ve now just sent assignments to your glass pads. You may check them and regroup at your earliest conveniences. Keep this to yourselves. Godspeed.”

They all then filed out, chatting amongst each other. There was a sense, at least in Kyle’s perception, that this undertaking wasn’t much liked. Not for its goals; these were considered very noble. Rather, the perceived fact that the assets were being thrown to the wolves to carry out this goal was not approved of, nor was the heavy secrecy, as the assets wanted to be able to tell of their work, which they knew would be very well received amongst Project Phoenix’s former victims. But, Jimmy had given them an order, and so they had to follow it.

After leaving Jimmy’s office, the assets went their separate ways. Tsurabaya knew where Kyle was to be housed, so he gave Kyle a ride on his hoverbike. Kyle had been gone for nearly a Terran week, and so things with the boys had moved forward, and Kyle had a new assignment as well.

Kyle, it turned out, was being given an instructors position. He was to prepare a new generation of soldiers, as part of Jimmy’s new “compassionate” training program. He would start as soon as the new trainees arrive.

Max was being put directly under Tsurabaya’s command, in the armory of Fort Worden, the largest of its kind in the United States at the time. He was to have a salaried position as a weapons repairer, pending his return to training.

Harune was also being given a salaried position, as a Japanese-English translator and teacher, pending basic combat training, at which point he was expected to be given a position in combat support. He would be assigned to remotely transport supplies in and out of combat situations, as needs demanded.

Tsurabaya revealed something else; he'd sat in on Harune's review board, knowing Kyle would have wanted him to, and said that Harune had not only massively exceeded the expectations of everyone present, he'd utterly shocked them. He was the most powerful human psionic that any expert on the review panel had ever seen, some having been doing nothing but studying and training psionics for over 30 years.

All in all, this seemed to Kyle to be as good an arrangement as he could have hoped for, though the revelation about Harune was something of a shock. Clearly, the tests at Cheyenne Mountain had not assessed to a high enough standard.

Tsurabaya took Kyle through the woods, angling towards the fort so that finally Kyle was in familiar territory. He then continued past the fort towards the area where Kyle had first entered it, when delivering the alien blood from Cuba, eventually turning up the very road Kyle had first walked down on that trip.

At the end of this road was a white three-story mansion, and somewhat past it, on either side of the road, were row after row of turn of the century clapboard apartment buildings, generally single-story with two apartments, and a few that were two-story with four apartments each, with external staircases to reach those on the second floor. It was at one of these latter buildings that Tsurabaya halted. Kyle glanced up the road, thinking of the portal to Cheyenne Mountain just a short hike away. He thought of how relieved Harune would be to know of its existence, that he would be able to see his friends so easily.

The mystery of which apartment was his and the boys' was solved almost as instantly as it came into his mind. Out of one of the lower floor apartments, Max and Harune came bursting, both dressed in green jumpsuits and combat boots, this apparently being the uniform of trainees at Fort Worden. The boys

came rushing to Kyle, much more affectionately than usual, he thought with a smile.

“I saw you coming!” Harune exclaimed at some point.

Kyle let this remark pass, but he recognized that it meant Harune must have been remote viewing, and also been able to sense Kyle’s presence from at least some distance away. The apartment building had no window from which one could see the road Tsurabaya and Kyle had used.

“It’s dinner time. You have to cook your own meals here,” Max explained, leading Kyle into the apartment.

The apartment was, it turned out, very generous in size, and pleasant, if very old fashioned. The walls had a floral patterned wallpaper, and the floors were of a dark wood. One entire wall was a dark bookshelf, in the living room which was the largest in the house. There were two bedrooms, one of which had bunk beds, denoting that it was Max and Harune’s room. The other had a king-sized bed for Kyle. There was also a very nice bathroom with an old fashioned clawfoot bathtub, and a rather tiny but adequate kitchen, with gas cookware, which Kyle was unfamiliar with, and Max promised he’d teach him how to use. All in all, an excellent housing arrangement.

By this point, it was dinner time. Kyle does not recall what the boys ate on their first night at Fort Worden, however, I may as well describe how food was handled at Fort Worden. Lunches were always had in office, on days when one wasn’t in the field, in which case they’d be served in the field, nonetheless, one had to fend for oneself at breakfast and dinner.

This was facilitated through ingredient deliveries. Each asset or household was given an allowance of basic, sustaining food items. Flour, eggs, butter, beef jerky, canned fruits and vegetables, evaporated milk, and just enough meat (usually sausages or cured bacon) to eat meat every other day for the week, not

counting the beef jerky, which was given out in very generous quantities. These allotments were doled out every Monday. Everyone was expected to finish off their allotment by the end of the week, with hoarding ingredients or skipping meals being a punishable offense.

Tsurabaya left, and Kyle, Max, and Harune ate their dinner. The boys were practically aching to see Prometheus, and Kyle promised to take them to her the next day, hopeful she'd open for them. Eventually, after dinner and a card game with the boys, it was bed time. Max pointed Kyle to his glass pad, which Kyle took to bed to review his assignment from Jimmy and his new position at Fort Worden.

Kyle switched on his glass pad to find that it had an all-new interface. This one was all blue and laid out in an efficient way, with sufficient information, as opposed to the esoteric system of Camp Hero, or the overwhelming system of Cheyenne Mountain. Here, everything was separated, clearly marked, and simple. Jimmy had most likely handed down an order for an updated system.

Kyle's new job, which he discovered the details of on the spot, will be described in good time. What's more immediate is Kyle's assignment for Jimmy's crusade, dubbed in the files as "Operation Tulsa." At the time, Kyle didn't understand this name.

Kyle's assassination assignment for Jimmy's program, it turned out, was targeted at one very specific man; Colonel John B. Constantine, former Director of Training for Project Phoenix. Responsible for the violent and rapacious training methods used on the children of Project Phoenix. He was a man whom Kyle had only seen a few times, from a distance. He'd heard enough stories at resistance meetings prior to the revolution that he knew to hate the man. However, the dossier Jimmy

provided gave even more detail. More, perhaps, than was even necessary or healthy.

The file told, with names redacted for privacy, some of Constantine's most egregious crimes. These included such things as a certain nine year old girl who refused to learn a language for a mission being correctively raped, or introducing the use of dogs in punishment; dogs which were kept deliberately starving, kept alive by regeneration tanks, and fed on the children they were trained to hate, usually to make examples of those who disobeyed. Constantine had also instituted the tradition of raping the prettiest or most talented child in front of the rest, to show that none were safe. He'd also ordered the trainees to do horrific things while on training missions, such as genocides for no specified reason, or mass rape by paralyzing a city with microwave weapons, then injecting the trainees with drugs so that they would rape any object in sight.

These and many, many, many other stories were told in Jimmy's dossier, in a detail that I myself cannot write. By the time Kyle had finished reading it, he himself was also "finished." He spent several hours in his bed, curled in a fetal position, sobbing and cursing any hypothetical god who would allow such a creature to exist.

Max and Harune heard this, and entered into Kyle's room. Kyle was able to hastily put away his glass pad, and held his sons as close as he could without hurting them, in between sobs making rather incoherent, but still somehow understandable promises that no horrors such as those he'd just read about would ever touch them. Ever the intuitives, Max and Harune didn't ask questions. They knew enough what he meant, and Harune in particular was likely absorbing everything in detail through Kyle's psychic output. Eventually, they all fell asleep.

Kyle was awoken with a start by a deafening alarm clock sound. The boys awoke then too, still cradled in Kyle's arms. Kyle smiled and sat up, the boys straightened up with him as well.

"The alarm clocks here are automated," Max explained. "No one gets to sleep in, even around here."

Kyle hugged his sons again, and at last they rose from the bed to prepare breakfast. It turned out that the boys had become quite proficient at it, having found a cookbook on base somewhere. Kyle's first breakfast at Fort Worden, he's fairly certain, was an omelet with mushrooms and bacon, which Max prepared.

In his closet, Kyle found what was apparently to be his uniform, which was a green Air Force flight suit, lined with the same material as a smartsuit. Nothing was worn under it, but it was fortunately not of the kind that required one to shave all their body hair. Also provided were some tall socks and black combat boots. Kyle slipped into these, then checked his glass pad for more details of his assignment from Jimmy. He saw that he was to carry it out with McKayla Foster and Erik Holtz as his companions. He decided he'd arrange to meet with them later that day, but for now, he was taking the boys to Prometheus. Kyle emotionally needed this after what he'd read the night before.

"What's the transport like in this place? Is there a tram?" Kyle asked as he finished his breakfast.

"There is," Harune explained, "but usually, we get rides on the hoverbikes. A lot of people here have them."

"I see. Well, we will be taking the tram to the beach today. You're going to see Prometheus," Kyle said. "If you get in trouble for being late, you can tell them that I said it was okay."

The rules be damned, Kyle had decided in his emotional state, and Max and Harune seemed to agree.

Kyle, Max, and Harune took their glass pads and left their apartment. They hadn't waited long before the tram arrived. Much like the Camp Hero tram, this one hovered, rather than drove on wheels, and it had no driver, starting and stopping on its automated path through the base. Kyle and sons rode on until it reached the beach on which Prometheus was parked.

Prometheus, it turned out, not only opened for the boys, but she was also kind enough to give them an audio tour, in English, opening and closing each door in turn. It was when they reached the bridge that Harune's eyes lit up, and he rushed to the captain's chair.

Harune: "Father, do you know how to pilot this?"

Kyle: "Not very well. I'm learning. Why?"

Harune: "Because I can. And I really want to Father. I know how to fly this ship."

Kyle paused. He'd not considered such a possibility, nor had he thought much about the fact that he had no crew to speak of. No engineers to tend the fuel or do repairs, no one who knew how to operate any of the systems, no star chart expert, no navigator, and of course no pilot.

Kyle: "I'll think about that. There's a process for me to hire you, I imagine."

A look of disappointment flashed across Harune's face, but it vanished just as quickly and was replaced with a more usual smile. Kyle patted Harune on the shoulder, and not long after, the tour ended. Kyle, Max, and Harune left Prometheus, and once again boarded the tram, heading to their designated locations for work.

As the tram rode, Kyle checked his glass pad, and saw that he'd received messages from both Erik Holtz and McKayla

Foster, who had arranged a meeting place after the workday was completed; beneath a Cedar of Lebanon towards the back area of the fort. For now, Kyle needed to orientate himself and find his office.

On Kyle's glass pad were the location of his office, and some directions for getting there, which began at Battery Kinzie. This building was described three chapters previously in this volume, and so I'll not detail it again in this one.

Kyle approached the receptionist at the entry of Battery Kinzie. The receptionist pulled a device from the top drawer of her desk which looked like a handheld barcode scanner found in a modern (at time of writing) supermarket. She held this up to Kyle's eyes and scanned them.

"Mr. Dellschau?" she asked after a glance at her computer.

"Yes." Kyle replied.

The receptionist sat to open a drawer in the bottom of her desk, which Kyle noticed was full of cards attached to clips. The receptionist rifled through this drawer for a moment, at last pulling out a card which she handed to Kyle.

This card was about three by four inches, and at the top was a picture of Kyle, below which, in black letters, were the words "Fort Worden Clearance." These words were printed over an icon of a bald eagle clutching a cedar tree.

"You have a level four clearance," the receptionist explained, "and you're late on your first day. Get your ass in gear."

Kyle accepted the card on its clip, clipped it to an outside pocket of his jumpsuit, and proceeded further into Battery Kinzie, as his glass pad had indicated he had to to reach his office. He managed to round a few corners before bursting out laughing at the receptionist's manner.

The instructions on Kyle's glass pad had indicated he needed to find a fireproof door with a card scanner. He eventually found

it, swiping his card, and following the concrete stairs downward beyond the door once it opened.

The stairs emerged into a hallway, glass on one side and a wall with doors on the other, spiraling gradually into the Earth, at a very slight angle. This was of the same sort of construction as the laboratory sector Kyle had seen when delivering the alien blood from Cuba, so he supposed it must be the standard for sector construction at Fort Worden.

Kyle looked down the central part of the structure through the glass side of the hallway. He saw that down at the bottom was a large room with a blue floor and a series of long desks. This was his destination.

Kyle walked down the spiraling structure, passing office after office. He didn't recognize any of the names on the offices, nor any of the people whom he went past on the hallway, which included a Naga alien and one woman who looked like a chimera of human and cat genetics. The walk took some time, as the angle of the spiral was very gradual, and the bottom of the structure, several hundred feet down.

Kyle reached the bottom, looking at the long desks, divided into 10 sections apiece, with possibly seven of these desks total.

"You're late on your first day," pointed out the young woman at the end of the desk closest to where Kyle entered. "Find your seat, they're in alphabetical order."

Kyle saw that every seat had a name on the back, printed on a laminated sheet of paper, which was tacked onto the back of the seat itself. The seats went in alphabetical order of surname. Kyle found the section of his desk quite quickly and seated himself.

Unlike Kyle's desks at Camp Hero and Cheyenne Mountain, these had no computer. There was, however, a card scanner atop, and Kyle scanned his card, at which point the screen on

his glass pad switched on for an instant, showing a green checkmark on the screen. He'd begun his job.

Every desk segment also had a single wide, flat drawer. Kyle opened his, and pulled out a single very large, very thick, white spiral-bound book, simply called "Training Manual" in black text.

The contents of this book, and how they were put into practice, is a tale for another time, as at the time of Kyle's introduction to the book, there weren't any trainees in need of exercising them.

At the end of the day, the assets were essentially set loose again. Most began boarding trams, while Kyle set out for the meeting place which McKayla Foster and Erik Holtz had settled on. He found it without much difficulty. There was indeed a massive Cedar of Lebanon, and peeking from behind it was Holtz, puffing nervously on an illicit cigarette.

Kyle approached, and Holtz offered him a cigarette, which Kyle silently accepted, more out of a nervous politeness than anything. This whole thing made him very uneasy. Soon enough, Foster appeared, and in the exact same way also accepted a cigarette. The three stood there for a moment, none seeming to want to be the first to speak.

"Alright," Kyle said at last, taking charge as usual, "it seems this is what we're doing."

To describe in great detail the hunt for Colonel Constantine which followed, and the other hunts for Project Phoenix's perpetrators which Kyle participated in, would serve little purpose. At best, it would serve to cause myself a certain vindictive catharsis, and at worst, it would cause myself, Kyle, and many others pain and triggering. So I'll quickly summarize a few hunts.

Constantine was known to be living in a home in the city of Neu Berlin, on Mars, where Kyle had been with Georg while assassinating Monica Roundtree a few years previously. As a result, Kyle suggested the group head towards the weapons dealer known as Travis whom Georg had introduced him to.

Holtz had some kind of discretionary fund in Der Bund currency, and so was able to not only acquire several weapons, but also a way of bypassing Constantine's security altogether; an old but still functioning tunnel boring vehicle, which had been in use by the Marauders before their extinction.

Using their glass pads, Kyle, Holtz, and Foster pinpointed the coordinates of Constantine's home, and drove the little tunnel boring machine directly underneath Constantine's home, emerging within his home, and then bursting from the vehicle, guns blazing.

Kyle himself killed Constantine. It went fairly fast, by necessity. However, Kyle started it by stabbing Constantine directly through the crotch, then in the lungs. Constantine died emasculated and terrified, suffocating on his own blood, his eyes darting wildly as if in search of salvation, before at last his brainstem was cut out and placed in the container provided by Jimmy. Kyle, Foster, and Holtz then drove the machine back to where Prometheus was parked, about 15 miles outside Neu Berlin, and the job was completed.

Corrine Steiner, assistant to Dr. Maria Simmons, was tracked down and killed by a team composed of Kyle, Jack, and Samantha Li. She was killed by being injected with an anesthetic as she moved through a crowd, and as she became dizzy, Samantha Li then helped her to a ladies room, slit her throat, and then quickly removed her brainstem.

Another, named Martin Goldman, apparently known within certain sectors of Camp Hero as an active participant at child

orgies, was sniped as he crossed a country bridge on a backwater planet, then again, had his brain stem cut out and brought to Fort Worden to be destroyed.

At one point, as he was wont to do, Kyle felt an urge to write a song to symbolize these hunts and the vengeance within them. What I am including here are the lyrics as Kyle wrote them, however readers will notice a difference in how Kyle wrote them and in how they have been changed in the publicly available version of the song.

I am what you want me to be
I am your worst fear, you'll find it in me
Come closer
Come closer

I am more than memory
I am what might have been
I am mystery
You know me
So show me

When I appear
It's not so clear if
I'm a simple spirit
Or I'm flesh and blood

But I'm alive, I'm alive, I am so alive
And I feed on the fear that's behind your eyes
And you're gonna be screaming, it's no surprise

I'm alive
So alive

I'm alive

I am flame and I am fire
I am destruction, decay, and desire
I'll hurt you
Then I'll kill you

I'm your wish, your dream come true
And I am your darkest nightmare too
I've shown you
I own you

And since you didn't make me
You can't change me
I'm the perfect stranger who knows you too well

But I'm alive, I'm alive, I am so alive
And I'll tell you the truth up until you die
You're alive, I'm alive, and I'll show you why

I'm right behind you
You say, "Forget!" but I remind you
You can try to hide, you know that I will find you

Because if you don't see me
You won't leave me behind

Oh-oh, oh
Whoa
Whoa

No, no, no

I'm alive, I'm alive, I am so alive
If you climb on by back then I'll show you to fly
You never can hide, but you're welcome to try

I'm alive
So alive
I'm alive

Yeah, yeah

I'm alive
I'm alive
I'm alive

I'm alive!

I myself once asked Kyle how he felt about his participation in these vengeful and violent hunts.

Kyle's response was thus; "My only regret is that I didn't have time to make them suffer."

Author's note. A thoroughly disturbing chapter, possibly the most disturbing in the book so far. If some of my Project Phoenix survivor readers take some catharsis in the vengeance on display here, I am happy. If some others have felt that this chapter stirred things in them they'd have rather forgotten, then I apologize.

Chapter 9

After the previous chapter, I will describe two more light-hearted missions which Kyle carried out, one with Anastasia Trent, the other with Max and Harune in tow. They both happened several years after Kyle had begun his training position, with Max and Harune both being in their mid-teens. I apologize for the rather sharp time jump, however I'm unsure of where else to insert these stories. I will start off with the mission which involved Kyle's escapades with Anastasia Trent.

In addition to his instructing position, and his missions for Emmermann (increasing in frequency during this period) Kyle was, on occasion, still required to do various operations for Project Phoenix proper. Thus, it was not a surprise when, on a day in what was most likely 1989, Kyle received a notice on his glass pad directing him to report to Jimmy's office for what was referred to as an "extraneous assignment."

Kyle opened the drawer of his desk segment and took out his Beretta, holstered it, then stood to leave, taking off on the walk up the spiraling structure. The walk was long, and much like he had at Camp Hero, Kyle was known to "bitch and moan" about the long walks, though this one was far shorter than at Camp Hero, since all assets at Fort Worden had open access to the tram.

Kyle arrived at the station and alighted the tram as close to Jimmy's office as he was able. As it turned out, Jimmy kept his office deliberately well off of any path which the tram took, so once again, Kyle had a bit of a trek. He arrived to find several hoverbikes on-site, curiously painted in desert camo.

Kyle entered the office tower, already hearing a few voices from the office itself, and climbed the stairs. He stepped into the office to find, in addition to Jimmy, Anastasia Trent, the woman with wild red hair whom Kyle had first observed on the walls of the recording studio at Camp Hero, and later met and spoken to a number of times at resistance meetings. She wore green pants and a pink and white striped poncho alongside several bead necklaces, and was holding an acoustic guitar. Around her were five men, wearing similar clothing to Anastasia, however their muscles and assault rifles betrayed that they were military. Kyle saluted Jimmy, and the soldiers accompanying Anastasia in turn saluted Kyle.

“At ease,” Jimmy said, and so Kyle also seated himself.

“What is this about, Sir?” Kyle asked.

“I’m looking for a German speaking guide,” Anastasia cut in.

“Yes,” Jimmy said. “Anastasia and I have kept our correspondence since she left. I invited her here, and thought of you when I learned she needed a guide.”

Kyle: “I see. Is that practical? I didn’t think American singers were being allowed in Der Bund territory.”

Jimmy: “Tensions are relaxed for now. At least for those traveling for cultural purposes.”

Kyle: “I see. And where would we be going?”

“Mars,” one of the soldiers explained, “for a year-long tour.”

“A Martian year,” Anastasia added. “687 days from the start of the tour.”

“Will I come back to when I left?” Kyle asked, thinking of Max and Harune.

Jimmy went on to explain that yes, Kyle would, as that was the standard procedure for the portal which would be opened for him to do so. Sensing he had no real choice, Kyle accepted, then turned his attention to the group.

Kyle: "Those guns won't be worth shit on Mars. They're delicate. They get sandy, they'll fuck up. We need better guns and a technician. Yoshiro Tsurabaya."

Jimmy: "I can't spare him. Best that I can do is Danny or Sarah."

Kyle shrugged.

Kyle: "Send Danny then. When do we leave?"

Anastasia: "Now. We have the suits and everything to go."

Kyle: "No you don't. Not until Danny and I have gotten you viable weapons and inspected the equipment."

"I've inspected the equipment," one of the soldiers, a young man with a crew cut said, rising.

"What's your name, soldier?" Kyle asked.

"Aaron Rostock. I'm not really a soldier, I'm private security," the young man with the crew cut said.

Kyle: "Right. Well, Aaron Rostock, private security, have you been to Mars?"

Rostock: "No Sir, but I've--"

Kyle: "Then you don't know what you're doing. You all head back to your ship. I'll be there with Danny, the guns, and the proper suits. Where are you parked?"

Jimmy: "They're next to the Prometheus, Kyle."

Kyle: "Fine. You better not have scratched her."

Jimmy: "I'll send Danny to the armory."

Kyle turned to leave, before Jimmy stopped him, handing Kyle a gift; a Der Bund passport, in Kyle's own name. This had been found, apparently, in some archives on Mars, meaning that Kyle's ploy there in 1955 had been successful. He had gained Der Bund citizenship.

Kyle then left, walked back to the tram, waited for it to come by again, then took it as close to the armory as he could, and as he rode, was eventually joined by Danny on the trip. The pair

talked at length about Danny's recent travels. Apparently, for the past six months, Danny had been in England, on a base underneath the town of Peasemore. This was purportedly the current home of the Camp Hero AI, which had once again demanded a move, for unknown reasons.

Eventually, the tram reached the armory of Fort Worden. Given the uniqueness of this location, it falls on me to offer a description of it.

The armory of Fort Worden was within what the inhabitants referred to as "bunker city," just past the inner wall of the fort. Here, rising from the ground, was row upon row of small concrete bunkers, adding up to dozens upon dozens. The armory occupied a cluster of 10 such bunkers, which were surrounded by a high electric fence, with a single gate where a guard always stood, glass pad in hand with a .50 caliber plasma pistol at the ready for anyone out of place. Tsurabaya took the security of his department very seriously indeed.

Within each of these 10 bunkers was a veritable maze of weapons. A maze which very few ever saw, as most never got past the gate. The guard would write the needs of the arriving soldiers on his or her glass pad, and a few minutes later, another soldier (called a "clerk") would arrive bearing the weapons they sought. However, as a friend of Tsurabaya's, Kyle had once been given a tour of what Tsurabaya liked to call "the archives." This was a fitting name for the armory. Under Tsurabaya's direction, it had become a virtual Library of Congress of weaponry. Any weapon one might require, however obscure, from almost any period in Earth's history, including prehuman civilization, one could find it here. To Kyle, it was like a candy shop.

"I need something desert proofed, for seven people," Kyle said to the soldier at the armory gate after his card was scanned, "and plenty of ammunition in an easy to find caliber."

“Time period?” the soldier asked.

“Current.” Kyle said.

“Location?”

“Mars. Der Bund colonial,” Kyle replied.

A few minutes later, a pair of soldiers emerged from within the armory complex, one carrying guns, the other carrying boxes of ammunition. The guns were, as it turned out, AK-74 rifles. Kyle grabbed the guns and Danny, the ammunition, and they took the tram to the beach where ships were parked.

Anastasia’s ship proved to be unlike anything Kyle had ever seen. The ship’s body was of a fairly standard design, being a circular disk about 120 feet across from one end to the other, and about 12 feet tall, the bulge rising about 8 feet more at its highest point. The ship was raised about 10 feet off the ground, on its landing gear. Its novelty lay in how the ship had been decorated.

The single circular edge of the ship was made up of lights. Large, yet streamlined lights which surrounded the ship entirely in neon colors, so that as the ship flew, it must have looked like a psychedelic whirl of color, especially as the top part had been painted in a tie-dye fashion. On the hull were painted the words; “This is a cultural ship ONLY. Do not fire,” in at least 10 languages, most of them alien. Kyle, in his mindset, found it hideous and decadent, but he didn’t say so.

“You have a beautiful ship here,” Danny said to Anastasia, who had stood on the beach to await Kyle and Danny.

“Thank you,” Anastasia said, “I’ll take those guns. You’re not going to be waving them around on my ship.”

Begrudgingly, Kyle and Danny handed over the guns, though they insisted on keeping the ammunition. Anastasia snapped her fingers, and like magic, a circular platform lowered from the

bottom of the ship. The three of them stepped onto it, and the platform again ascended into the ship.

The interior was what one would expect of a musical tour ship. In the center was a small glass tube with a door, containing a small desk with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and a few microphones. A tiny recording studio. Rising from the floor were a few sets of bunk beds, small enough that Kyle was worried about how well he'd fit into them.

At one side of the ship was the captain's seat, only identifiable as such because of the usual sticks, wheels, and buttons around it, as well as a helmet of some sort attached to the seat by a tangle of wires.

Along the walls were a series of closets, one of which Anastasia said served as a combined sonic toilet and sonic shower, which provided material for the ship's replicator, mounted on a wall. The guns were stashed in a compartment in the floor. The man who had introduced himself as Aaron Rostock sat in the captain's chair, and a few minutes later, the ship took off for Mars.

"Where exactly are we headed?" Kyle asked, pulling Anastasia aside.

"Well. I don't rightly know," Anastasia said matter-of-factly, then turned to one of the closets which lined the sides of the ship, and opened it. Kyle saw that this closet had been customized by being filled with shelves, now laden with books. Anastasia pulled a book from one of them, a thick orange volume simply titled *Mars*, and turned to Kyle.

"I have this book on the planet, so I suppose we'll know when we get there," Anastasia explained.

Kyle took the book and flipped it open. It did seem fairly complete at first glance, but his heart rather sank when he saw the book's publication date.

Kyle: "Anastasia. This book was printed in 1971. We can't rely on this."

Anastasia: "I know it was. It was all I could find on Ivonia."

Kyle: "You don't know what you're walking into here."

Anastasia: "You seem to have forgotten that we come from the same place. And I have performed in war zones before. Kyle, I know what I'm doing."

Kyle: "I hope you do."

Anastasia: "You'd be amazed at how peaceful people are."

Kyle: "So, what? We just show up in a settlement and ask to perform, and hope they don't shoot our asses dead?"

Anastasia: "That's how it usually works."

Kyle: "Fucking insanity."

"We're almost there!" Rostock called from the captain's seat. "I'll idle in orbit while we find where to land."

A few moments later, Rostock pulled his hands off the ship's controls, and stood. Anastasia reopened the book cabinet and pulled out a folded map, which she then proceeded to unfold and lay out on the floor, showing that it was a large and fairly detailed map of Mars. Unlike the book, the map was modern to the time period these events took place in. Everyone poured over this map, with Kyle and Danny pointing out volatile zones. Eventually, the decision was made to head towards the Charitum Montes region, as this area seemed a decent distance from any conflict zone, at least one known by anyone, and the map indicated a few settlements.

"Before we land," Kyle said, "I need to inspect your environment suits. Please tell me you have some."

"Right this way," one of the young soldiers said, standing.

The young man opened one of the ships' many closets, revealing that there were indeed a number of orange, form-

fitting environment suits. Kyle pulled a few out and began inspecting them.

“These have patches on them. American flag patches,” Kyle pointed out, “these will get us shot on sight. Danny, get me a bayonet from one of those guns please.”

Danny did so, and together, he and Kyle delicately removed the patches from the suits, being careful not to tear the suits themselves. This maneuver finished, Rostock retook the captain’s seat and began piloting the ship, presumably down onto the surface of Mars.

“My God, it’s so beautiful,” Rostock marveled, filling Kyle with an eagerness to see it. As the ship had no windows, no one save Rostock could look outside, and he was only able because of the display in his helmet.

“Alright,” Rostock said at last, “I see some lights. We’re parking by this mountain, edge of the tree line.”

“What’s the time of day in this region?” Danny asked.

“Looks like near sunset,” Rostock said.

“Alright, environment suits, people!” Kyle barked, as if ordering his students. “And get your guns.”

“No guns,” Anastasia said firmly, opening one of the closets, “just identification. We go in peace.”

At these words, Anastasia pulled a locked metal box from the closet, which turned out to be filled with identification, among them, Kyle’s Der Bund passport. His heart leapt at the sight of it. All the others had American identification. As everyone was changing into their environment suits and boots, Kyle grabbed the bayonet which he’d used to remove the patches from the suit and tucked it into his boot, telepathically instructing Danny to do the same with his bayonet. He was determined to not be completely unarmed.

Eventually, everyone crowded onto the platform which would allow them to alight, Anastasia carrying her guitar in its case. A few moments later, the platform descended.

“It is definitely beautiful,” one of the soldiers observed.

“Yes. Keep your identification ready, people,” Kyle ordered.

The ship had parked on the edge of a thick forest, next to a mountain. As was the usual for Mars, the forest abruptly ended, and the landscape was once again the boundless, lonely, yet beautiful deserts which Kyle so loved.

“Let’s go towards those lights,” Anastasia said, pointing towards some lights which could just be made out in the forest.

“Stay frosty, everyone. You don’t know what might be waiting in there to fuck up your day,” Danny said, and the group set towards the lights.

The forest was quite thick, though there were no signs of any predators or danger, at least at first. It wasn’t very long before footsteps were heard, however.

“Everyone hold!” Kyle ordered, and just a few seconds later, they were intercepted by a couple.

The couple was an older one, in their early to mid 60s by Kyle’s estimation, and enormous by Earth standards, both being well over seven feet tall, and quite muscular. Kyle supposed they must have been born on Mars and developed such bodies through the lighter gravity. The man had a long gray beard, and the woman, thick salt and pepper hair. Both wore long fur coats and snug-fitting pants of either fleece or tweed, as well as tall black button boots of heavy leather. They wore no helmets or masks, which denoted that the air was breathable in this area. Most alarmingly, both also carried long, wide barreled rifles. Kyle realized with some surprise that they were .50 caliber flint-lock rifles. However, the guns were pointed down, and the couple didn’t look especially hostile.

“We saw your craft. Who are you?” the woman of the couple demanded sharply.

“And why are you here?” the man added.

The couple spoke German in what Kyle realized with a start was his own native dialect of Silesian. The language he dreamed in and slipped into when no one was listening, for reasons he didn’t fully understand. He pulled off his helmet and stepped in front of the group, speaking the dialect also.

“We’re musicians. Or this young lady with us is. We’re not here to cause any trouble,” Kyle said calmly.

“You’re not here to take more of our young men?” the man asked.

“No. We’re only here to see if you might enjoy a song,” Kyle said.

The couple glanced at each other, then gave the classic German shrug before turning back to the group.

“Well,” the man said, “you don’t seem like any military we know. You’re very welcome to come with us. I’m Johannes Voss, this is my wife Ilsa.”

“We’d be honored, Herr Voss. Frau Voss,” Kyle said.

“What the fuck are these Krauts talking about?” one of Anastasia’s men, possibly Rostock, muttered. Kyle ignored it and turned to the group.

“We’re being welcomed,” Kyle said. “These are Herr and Frau Voss. Take off your helmets, the air is breathable here.”

“All of you watch your steps, you don’t want to track horse shit,” Herr Voss said in a good natured tone, before turning to lead the group, and Kyle translated the message with a chuckle. The group removed their helmets and followed.

The group found themselves in a place that was well and truly out of time. The clearing which Herr and Frau Voss guided them to was home to a very small village, almost a hamlet. All the

buildings were either one or two-story, and most were made of logs, with a few stone buildings as well, surrounding a large community garden of about 10 beds.

The garden, and apparently the entire village, were watered by a fascinating system of aqueducts, elevated above the village on stilts. Water would run through these, being distributed to all of the village buildings via pipes which came off the aqueducts themselves. The garden was watered by a massive watering can which was fed through a pipe. The can would fill with water, and when sufficiently full, it would tip over, causing it to water the garden. It achieved this by being conveyed around the garden via a contraption of weights and pulleys.

“German engineering,” Kyle thought to himself with pride.

The village itself was teeming with inhabitants, all very tall and muscular, denoting they’d been born on a lighter gravity planet, and all of them of seemingly Germanic stock. They all wore the same furs and snug trousers which the Vosses wore, irrespective of gender or age. Several of the village buildings were open fronted, showing that they were shops, and one was a two-story tavern. Kyle’s gaze was drawn to a shop selling weapons, none of which seemed to follow a design any later than the 1850s, consisting of bows, crossbows, and black powder guns. Another building of interest was an elongated wooden hut, triangular in shape. A pagan hall of worship of some description. Just what was this place, anyway?

“Ask them what the local currency is and how to get it. We need to buy dinner,” one of Anastasia’s men, a young gent called Perkins, instructed. Kyle followed the instruction, asking Herr Voss, who rather guffawed at the question.

“We barter here,” Herr Voss said. “You either work for your food or you give us something useful.”

“Looks like you’ll have to sing for your supper,” Kyle said to Anastasia, with a smile.

“Just what I’d planned to do,” Anastasia said.

“The lady would like to sing. Where may she set up?” Kyle asked.

“In the tavern,” Frau Voss said, “but she’ll have a better audience if she waits until the dinner arrives.”

“Then may we wander around?” Kyle asked, eager to explore this place.

“You may, but don’t go too far into the forests. There’s a bathhouse up the trail a ways to clean up in. We always bathe nightly here. Welcome to Grünsburg,” Frau Voss said.

“We’ve been turned loose,” Kyle said, turning back to the group. A little cheer went up among them, and the group set out into the village of Grünsburg. Kyle chuckled at how willing they all were to set out, in spite of not speaking the language.

Kyle being Kyle, he made a beeline for the weapons store. He examined several of the bows first, discovering that they must be of local production, as they were carved of the same wood as the fir-like trees which surrounded the area. The same proved true of the flintlock rifles.

“Can I help you with something?” a woman’s voice behind Kyle asked, in broken High German. “We don’t get tourists here very often. Perhaps you’d like a souvenir?”

Kyle looked up, to see a middle aged blonde woman standing behind the desk of the weapons shop. She was an Aryan beauty, and Kyle, as usual, found himself having less than pure thoughts and looking at more than her face.

“Perhaps I would,” Kyle said flirtatiously, “and please, speak Silesian. It’s my dialect as well. What’s the story with this place anyway?”

“Well. People need to hunt for their food, I provide the means,” the proprietress stated simply.

“I meant the story with Grünsburg,” Kyle said with a chuckle.

“It’s a village. We provide for ourselves. I find that a sufficient explanation,” the woman said, “are you buying anything?”

“Nothing to buy with,” Kyle said, “perhaps another day.”

Kyle left then, seeing that it was well and truly sunset by then. He stared at the sunset, as he always did on Mars, then returned his attention to the village, still determined to befriend a few locals. He got a few stares as he walked, no doubt due to his clothing. Eventually, he spotted two boys seated on the porch of a house, playing some sort of marbles game and approached them, knowing from experience that if he was their friend, he’d be theirs.

“Who’s winning?” Kyle asked.

“Josef is, the bastard,” one of the boys, the slightly older one with dark hair said angrily.

“Mother told you not to call me that,” the younger, lighter haired boy said with a roll of his eyes.

“You’re Josef. What’s your brother’s name?” Kyle asked, addressing the blonde boy.

“I’m Joachim,” the brunette boy said, “who are you?”

“I’m Kyle. Can I play?”

“Yes,” Joachim said, “anything to keep the little bastard from beating me.”

“That’s it, I’m telling mother when we finish the game,” Josef spat. Kyle threw his head back in a full-throated laughter he hadn’t enjoyed in some time.

Kyle had been playing marbles with the boys for a short while when the village was disrupted by a loud, clanging bell, and almost instantly, people began appearing on their porches,

including a heavy set woman on the porch where Kyle was playing with the boys.

“Oh,” she said in obvious surprise at seeing Kyle, “are you from up the river?”

“Bit further than that,” Kyle said, “what’s the bell?”

“It means dinner has come,” the woman said, “you’ll find it available in the tavern, I expect.”

“Kyle played with us,” Josef piped up.

“Did he now? Well, thank you Kyle,” the woman said. “Where are you from?”

“Nowhere, I suppose,” Kyle said. “I won’t impose on you further Madam.”

“Everyone is from somewhere, and you needn’t be so formal,” the woman said with a laugh. “Enjoy your dinner.”

Kyle stepped off the porch of the little log house, looking up the street toward the village square and then back toward the houses. From out of the houses, women were emerging, most of them holding carving knives. In the village square, young men were arriving, rifles and bows slung over their backs, wheeling wooden carts which were laden rather gruesomely with dead animals. Several large, elk like creatures, a number of what looked to be very large hairless rabbits, and quite a few of the burrowing Capybara-like creatures which Kyle was already familiar with. They’d come back from a hunt, Kyle realized.

Kyle surveyed the village, looking for those he’d come with. Danny, he saw, was awkwardly attempting to flirt with a young woman via hand gestures. Even more amusingly, this seemed to somehow be working. Anastasia herself came from the community garden, her hands and knees dirtied to reveal she’d been working, along with several other women and one of the young gents in her employ, the rest of whom appeared soon.

The bell which had seemingly brought Grünsburg to life had come from the tavern, and the carts stopped in front of the tavern first. From somewhere, a few tables were fetched, long and with troughs attached to the legs underneath, the tops of the tables being studded with holes. A number of the animals were hoisted onto these tables, and a small crowd of people, both men and women, began crowding around to carve the animals up to serve in the tavern. The remaining animals, still on the carts, were taken to the houses.

Throughout all of this scene, (which took place over less time than it takes to write) no Grünsburg resident looked unhappy. Everyone had smiles on their faces, as did Kyle, though his had a touch of sadness in it, as he wondered how he'd ever bring himself to leave such a Utopian place, and even more so, how long could such a place continue to exist, given the war on Mars. A few times since arriving, he'd seen or heard ships flying overhead. He saw that Anastasia wore the exact same smile.

By this point, Anastasia had fetched her guitar from somewhere, and was standing alongside Kyle, as was Danny.

Danny: "Time for supper, and you to sing for it."

Anastasia: "Yes. I'm always nervous at this part."

Kyle: "I'll make the announcement. Let's head inside."

The tavern was in the traditional Norse style, being stone, open fronted, and having a single long bar along one wall, several long tables with benches running down each side, and one last long buffet table.

At the far end was a section raised up several feet by a few stone steps. A stage. Kyle approached the bar, asking if it would be possible to use this stage once dinner was served. When he was assured this was fine, himself, Anastasia, Danny, and the others tried to blend in until one of the side doors of the tavern opened, and tray after tray laden with fresh meats, breads, and

produce came through. They didn't succeed, but they tried, and when they saw that people were beginning to sit to eat, they all went onto the stage, someone taking a barstool for Anastasia.

Kyle made the announcement, his already commanding voice carrying quite well in the stone space.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kyle said, realizing as he did that it was perhaps not the best greeting, "you've all by now likely heard of visitors in your beautiful town. We've come from..... somewhere quite far, to give you some music, hopefully in exchange for some of your food. I present to you all; Anastasia Trent!"

Anastasia moved to the front of the stage, while someone placed the barstool for her to sit. She waved, then sat on the stool, strummed her guitar for a few seconds as if finding the correct keys, then settled on a tune, playing and singing the following song. Readers may notice that Anastasia's version ends slightly differently than how this song is ended in Terran performances. For the audiobook I've also chosen a male cover of this song, as it seemed closest to Anastasia's in spirit.

Well I heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do ya?
Well it goes like this
The fourth and fifth
The minor fall and the major lift
The baffled king composing
Hallelujah

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

Hallelu-ooh-ooh-jah

Well your faith was strong, but you needed proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew ya
She tied you to her kitchen chair
She broke your throne and she cut your hair
And from your lips she drew the
Hallelujah

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelu-ooh-ooh-jah

Well maybe I've been here before
I've seen this room and I've walked the floor
You know, I used to live alone before I knew ya
I've seen your flag on the marble arch
But love is not a victory march
It's a cold and it's a broken
Hallelujah

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelu-ooh-ooh-jah

Well there was a time when you let me know
What's real and going on below
But now you never show that to me, do ya?
I remember when I moved in you

And the holy dark was moving too
And every breath we drew was
Hallelujah

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelu-ooh-ooh-jah

Well maybe there is a god above
But all I ever learned from love
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya
And it's not a cry you hear at night
It's not somebody who's seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken
Hallelujah

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelu-ooh-ooh-jah

Well I heard there was a secret chord...

Anastasia's genius with music shattered the language and cultural barrier. At the end of the song, there was hardly a dry eye in the room, even among the Nordic giants which made up the majority of Grünsburg's male population.

"Brava!" someone in the crowd shouted at last, breaking the silence. A standing ovation went through the crowd, and thus Anastasia and crew's dinner was bought. They all stepped off

the stage, and were able to have a generously proportioned dinner, and several glasses of the local mead.

Kyle found himself seated next to Herr Voss, as it happened. Kyle was determined to find out the story of this village, and so he asked Herr Voss. The answer he received wasn't what he'd expected, yet it was somehow the only answer that made sense.

Herr Voss claimed that this village's origins lay approximately 150 Martian years previously, before the war. According to Herr Voss, in this time period, 400 Silesians, 325 women and 75 men, all under the age of 25, half of the women being pregnant, had awoken in a single barracks on Mars, in this very region. All of these people had total amnesia, however the barracks had contained both many tools for building, hunting, and so on, as well as many books about their new environment and instructions on how to build homes, clear forests, manufacture weapons, musical instruments, forage, and so forth, as well as pagan books and general encouragement to have as many children as possible.

This region of Mars contained a river, and so it had been christened "Neue Rhineland," and the descendants of the original batch of 400 Silesians had built 15 villages along its length, one of which was Grünsburg.

Kyle: "Do you know of the war?"

Herr Voss: "We're not blind. We see the crafts. Twice a year, some soldiers in black come and get our young people. The young people come back three years later and they can't remember anything. Sometimes they're able to speak Japanese or English, but they don't know how they learned it."

Kyle: "I suppose that's why you asked if we'd come to take more young men."

Herr Voss: "Yes."

Kyle: "I notice there's something of a lack of men here. Are the young women eligible?"

Herr Voss threw his head back in laughter.

Herr Voss: "You're like my son, always rutting with every available girl. You can stop speaking so formally. Do you have something in your ass?"

"I suppose I'm inclined to be polite among such old fashioned people," Kyle said with a laugh.

Herr Voss: "We're old fashioned, not stupid. Do as you like, Herr Dellschau. My son does and I don't seem to object. It's not my concern. More mead?"

Kyle: "Yes, please. Tomorrow, will you show me your industrial zones? I'm curious about your weaponry and such, and I don't think I'll be leaving very soon."

Herr Voss: "If you'll help me hunt. I promised my wife new boots."

Kyle: "Gladly."

Herr Voss: "Your other men will find work, I'm sure."

Herr Voss returned with the mead, and Kyle mingled a bit longer as he drank it, having enjoyed his dinner. He then decided it was time to head back to the ship for the night, as it was very dark and therefore very cold, and he wasn't sure if Grünsburg had anywhere to sleep.

Kyle was able to locate most of Anastasia's crew, save for Danny. He had difficulty in finding Anastasia herself at first, but he soon saw her, seated in a corner with her back to the room, as if attempting to hide, writing in a small notebook which she must have brought in her pocket. Kyle approached and touched her shoulder.

Kyle: "What are you writing?"

Anastasia: "Ideas for my single."

Kyle: "Single?"

Anastasia: "Every planet I go to, I write a new single about, to premiere at the end of my tour. Should we be heading back?"

Kyle: "Yes. Have you seen Danny?"

Anastasia laughed.

Anastasia: "I saw Danny heading upstairs with some girl. He'll find his own way back, leave him be."

Kyle: "Right. Let's slip out and be heading back."

"I don't think there's much chance of that," Rostock said at Kyle's back, "they don't want us in the forests at night. Someone is bringing us some local clothes, and they say we can sleep in the bathhouse."

"How'd you make that deal?" Kyle asked.

"There was a guy who spoke English. I had to agree to be his plumber," Rostock said sheepishly. "He's bringing a cart with some clothes from his house. God only knows how we'll make them fit."

Kyle, Anastasia, and Rostock drifted to the front of the tavern, awaiting the arrival of the cart, which did come quite soon after, being pushed by a youngish man with curly blonde hair. The cart was laden with clothing of the type worn by the residents of Grünsburg.

"These are your clothings," the young man said, in broken yet confidently voiced English. Kyle supposed he must be among the ones whom Herr Voss had mentioned, who had been taken into the war and returned with amnesia, yet able to speak English.

"Go get the rest of the guys," Anastasia instructed Rostock, after giving the necessary thanks.

Rostock returned with the remainder of Anastasia's men, minus Danny of course, and they set for the bathhouse, along with a number of villagers, who were apparently also ready to begin winding down for the evening.

The bathhouse was all wooden, and set up much like a Scandinavian sauna, with several rooms of varying temperatures as well as large open air baths. There were enough towels that Kyle and company could make pseudo beds for themselves on the sauna benches, once the activity had died down from so many people coming and going for their evening baths. The local clothes proved surprisingly comfortable, though as Rostock had predicted, most had difficulty fitting them on, as they'd been designed for Martian colonists, and most of the crew stuck with their own boots. Kyle had very little difficulty, being hardly shorter than the average colonist.

Morning came, and Kyle and company rose with the sun. They piled onto the path through Grünsburg and found that they'd risen rather early, as no one else in the village seemed to be awake yet. Soon, they found Danny also wandering the streets, wearing his orange environment suit from the night before.

"You all planning to fuckin' leave me?" Danny demanded.

"Oh, you poor baby," Kyle said. "How was she?"

"Not bad for a giant," Danny said with a chuckle. "Hey, where's he going?"

Danny pointed at one of Anastasia's men, a lad called Johnson, who was holding a bunch of flowers gathered from the paths around Grünsburg. Johnson had split from the group and was stepping into the Norse temple, his head bowed in obvious reverence.

"He's making an offering, I suppose," Anastasia said. "I'm going to get an early start on the garden."

Everyone went their separate ways, and out of curiosity, Kyle followed Johnson into the temple. He was quite surprised when he entered to find that Johnson was not only giving an offering before the altar of Odin, but was giving a correct invocation and prayer, in full and fluent Old Norse. Kyle stood respectfully at

the back of the temple until Johnson had finished, then spoke to him in Old Norse.

Kyle: "You know the ancestor's language?"

Johnson: "Yes. You're a pagan?"

Kyle: "I..... don't know what I believe."

This was, perhaps, the first time Kyle had acknowledged that he was no longer the militant atheist he had for so long considered himself to be.

Johnson: "Well, your offering is equally useful. Go on and try one."

Kyle: "I don't exactly know how. You can show me later. I have to help on a hunt today."

Kyle turned and walked out of the temple, with Johnson following behind. Kyle milled about in Grünsburg for the next little while, continuing to explore, before once again a bell was rung, and the village began coming to life. Kyle, who had wandered into a little alley lined with tiny shops selling religious wares, (altars, statues, herbs, and so on) returned to the main thoroughfare of Grünsburg. Here, he found Herr Voss looking around expectantly while holding two flintlock rifles and a leather carrying case which Kyle assumed held reloading equipment, as well as a closed wicker basket which Kyle supposed must hold their lunch.

"Good to see you, young man," Herr Voss said at Kyle's approach. "I was worried you'd left in the night."

"I always honor my agreements, Herr Voss," Kyle said, taking one of the guns and the leather case. "What's the target?"

"Ah," Voss said, setting down the wicker hamper and opening it, "let me show you."

From the wicker hamper, in which Kyle caught an inviting whiff of cured meat and fresh bread, Voss withdrew a doubled

over piece of paper, which he unfolded to reveal an illustration of some sort of bright green monitor lizard.

“We need to kill about five of these,” Herr Voss explained, “I promised my wife a pair of fine lizard skin boots. These lizards are very difficult to kill, however. They hide very well, and they can nearly outrun a bullet. You have to be very quick. Have you ever shot something before?”

“I think you could say so,” Kyle said with a smile more for himself than Voss. “Shall we?”

Kyle and Herr Voss thus set out into the thick forest of fir-like trees, their equipment in tow. They went a fair distance, until no more sounds of the village could be heard, all the while keeping to a very loose path of trees which had been visibly marked by slashes with a blade. Several times, they crossed other paths which Voss claimed led to other villages in Neue Rhineland.

At some point, Kyle felt the need to ask Voss what the local predators were. He certainly seemed to be worried about their presence, with the way he was constantly looking around. Kyle was expecting to hear of the spiders. Voss told him of a different danger altogether; massive, carnivorous locusts, each about the size of a draft horse, which thankfully flew individually rather than in swarms.

Kyle and Herr Voss did eventually find a few specimens of the lizards they sought, and Kyle was able to impress with his shooting, at one point shooting two lizards with one bullet, and from quite a long distance. Voss, of course, had no idea of Kyle’s enhanced sniper’s vision.

The men managed to get the requisite number of lizards before Herr Voss decreed it to be lunchtime. By that point, they were able to hear the flow of water coming from somewhere, and followed the sound out of curiosity. Voss placed the lizards

in a canvas bag he'd been carrying in his pocket and followed Kyle.

The sound of the flowing water turned out to be coming from a wide, deep, clear river, the shallow edges of which rushed past, creating the sound. Kyle looked up and down the river, seeing that on the other side, a good ways up, was a massive water wheel on the edge of the river.

"Siegelsberg" Voss explained. "One of the other villages in Neue Rhineland. Bunch of savages."

"I see," Kyle said, chuckling. "Are they where the food is grown? Or the metal smelted to make your guns?"

"You're very perceptive," Voss said. "I'll have to keep my eye on you. I'll show you the places where things are made, in good time."

With that, Herr Voss decisively opened the woven hamper. He and Kyle washed the blood and gunpowder from their hands in the river, then turned their attention to their lunch of dark bread rolls with cured sausages, made from the meat of the local hairless rabbits, according to Voss. They then headed back the way they'd come, to Grünsburg, so that it was mid-afternoon by the time they returned. That evening was mostly a repeat of the previous one.

The third day, a young man of Grünsburg by the name of Fischer agreed to show Kyle the industrial capacities of the 15 villages of Neue Rhineland. They went up a long, winding path which Kyle hadn't been on before, which once again led to the river christened the Neu Rhine.

At the end of this path was a pier jutting into the river. Tied to this pier were several long rafts with sails in the middle, looking more Chinese than Germanic. Fischer and Kyle stood on one of these boats, using the oars provided to row up the Neu Rhine.

The first place which Kyle and Fischer visited was a farming village, known simply as Feld. Here, food was grown in an ingenious system of terraced farming which descended into the ground in a cone shape, watered by an occasional outpouring of water from pipes which came from the river, sprayed like rain because of a dome of very fine mesh which covered the descending terraces themselves.

Next came a smelting village, in which metal, usually gathered in pebbles from the river and the edges of the forest, was smelted to make all the wares one could need, all in stone and iron smelting ovens. This smelting village had the appropriate name of Metallstadt.

Yet another village had the name of Waldberg, where wood was cut, either into logs and blocks for the villagers to stoke their fireplaces and build their homes, or into weapons.

As it turned out, Kyle, Anastasia, and crew remained in the Neue Rhineland region of Mars for three Martian months. They would go from village to village, mead hall to mead hall, and Anastasia would sing. Kyle would entertain with his sharp-shooting skills, shooting increasingly difficult things which were of no difficulty to him. The other men learned enough Silesian to get by, and did odd jobs everywhere they went. Johnson did, in the end, teach Kyle the basics of making offerings in the Norse tradition, and Kyle came to think of himself as a pagan.

Kyle found that the women of Neue Rhineland, in their pagan and colonial mindset, were usually "willing." Their only disappointment was likely when they didn't become pregnant. Danny also developed something of a reputation with the ladies, as his red hair and dark eyes made him rather "exotic."

Eventually however, as all things must, Kyle and crew's time in Neue Rhineland drew to a close. They began noticing an increased volume of ships overhead, and they were told that

soon, “the men in black uniforms” would be arriving to pick up young people for the war, and that it was likely best if they moved on.

To this day, Kyle considers the leaving of Neue Rhineland to be the most difficult act of departure he ever carried out. He yearned so deeply to have his boys sent here and to live out the rest of his days here, alongside them, in what he hoped and prayed were not the last gasps of an inevitably dying breed which he, in his diary called; “those who understand.”

“Alright,” Anastasia said resolutely upon everyone loading onto the ship, “where are we going next?”

The map of Mars was brought from its cupboard, and once again, the crew crowded around it. As before, Anastasia brought out the large book on Mars, and options for destinations were discussed. Eventually, they decided to next visit a small underground Japanese colony known as Nakajima.

Nakajima proved somewhat less friendly, and to describe its appearance would be rather redundant, having already described multiple of these underground Martian communities previously, so I’ll avoid repeating myself. In any event, Anastasia and crew only spent three days in Nakajima, and had to sleep on their ship, parked several miles away in the desert, necessitating a long hike.

For most of the remaining Martian year, this was how Kyle and the others drifted over Mars, from settlement to settlement, playing at whatever venue would take them. As it turned out, most of them were quite willing to take them, however most were not willing to put them up.

Twice, as they were flying, Anastasia, Kyle, and crew received orders over a hacked intercom to land and prepare to be boarded or be shot down. They did so, and both times, their ship was

searched, and both times Danny used psionic tricks which ensured that their weapons were not discovered.

Once, the group was set upon by an entire “herd” of spiders. They managed to reach the ship before any of them was snatched, at which point Rostock had to launch the ship into orbit in order to shake off the spiders which were swarming it.

In one village, the group walked away with a case of whiskey, in another, they left with a number of locally forged knives. Only rarely were they paid cash beyond whatever tips their audiences gave them. Not because the locals had none; rather, they seemed afraid to pay with cash somehow.

Everywhere, Anastasia was popular. Her American-ness seemingly didn't matter to them, although a few did make remarks about her “not acting American.” Her fame grew as time went on, as her performances were broadcast over social media on the MarsNet, so that on occasion, people already knew who she was by the time she arrived.

Everywhere they went, Kyle would ask about the war. He heard many, many horror stories from the perspective of the German and Japanese colonists. How their children had been abducted by American soldiers for unknown purposes, how settlements had been raided at night, usually on holidays, and how on occasion, colonists would turn out to be Manchurian Candidates who would carry out acts of mass murder from within the safety of the colony. The most commonly named perpetrator was one single unit; The Black Crows, who wore black metallic power armor suits with a single feather painted on the back. They operated, supposedly, out of a base known as Fort McCord, though no one Kyle spoke to had actually seen this base or knew its location.

In spite of this, Kyle's lifelong love for Mars was cemented even further. On every trip, he seemed to find another layer of

this wonderful planet. It was like a beautiful, never ending onion.

Kyle and Johnson grew close, and Johnson told Kyle his story. Johnson's mother was a German colonial from Titan, who had fallen in love with an American man and defected, changing her identity and hiding in a backwater American colony with her husband, but never renouncing her paganism, which she'd passed along to Johnson.

There was only about a week left on the tour when Anastasia approached Kyle as they were on the ship, having just finished with another settlement.

"Kyle," Anastasia said, "I want to close the tour in Neu Berlin. Is that safe?"

Kyle shrugged.

"I have no idea," Kyle said. "I suppose it will be. We'd have been shot down long ago if they didn't want us here, and Neu Berlin is the capital. Let's go."

"Alright," Anastasia said. "Let's make one more stop. I want to announce it. I finished my single last night."

At the next stop, another little underground settlement, Kyle announced Anastasia's closing performance on stage, promising that she'd end the tour with her new single, which he assured them would be available for purchase later. It would be contraband, he imagined, but he had a feeling they'd find a way around that.

Kyle's assessment of their security proved correct. They approached Neu Berlin spaceport unmolested, and were granted access inside the colony proper quite easily, once they'd shown their identification. They headed for the largest club which their book mentioned; Der Adler. This club was happy to set them up, and thus Anastasia gave her last performance.

Anastasia's performance, it turned out, was even more successful than she'd hoped for, as not only was Der Adler packed to the gills, but so was the street outside, and speakers had to be set up to allow the outer crowd to hear. Anastasia played her usual routine, and then made an announcement.

"I want to thank you all for coming out here," Anastasia said, "and I wanted to close with a new little song I wrote, about this beautiful planet I've had the privilege of touring these past months. I hope... I hope you'll take it to heart."

With that, Anastasia returned to her guitar, and played her last single.

A lilac comes, on a poison thorn
It has roots, dirty and torn
Youngins playing, as the Black Crow Flies
Mamas weeping
Hear the mountains cry

There was another, a wild dirt flower
Cold was her heart, and as dark as dire
Tears on the ground
Where her love did die
Neath the bloody moon
Hear the mountains cry

Go dig his grave, narrow and deep
Set a jug of whiskey, by his thirsty feet
Lay two pennies, on his rolling eyes
Two women wailing
Hear the mountains cry

Oh, the wind blows weary

And the willows sigh
Rivers of sorrow
When the mountains cry

Rivers of sorrow
When the mountains cry

There was a moment of deathly silence, and then an applause so thunderous that it must have been heard throughout all the streets of Neu Berlin.

“Oh thank you, thank you,” Anastasia said through tears into her microphone. “I hope someday I can come back here to you all, and that you’ll remember me. Good night, New Berlin!”

With that, Anastasia turned and walked from the stage, with Kyle and the others in tow, leaving out the back exit and stealing back to their ship. Rostock piloted the ship from the atmosphere, towards a gate back to Fort Worden, to drop off Kyle and Danny, after what they both would consider one of the most personally significant missions they’ve ever carried out.

Another of Kyle’s missions which he now looks on as personally significant is one which occurred in Saigon in the 1950s. I will now turn the reader’s attention to it.

This mission occurred several years into Kyle’s job as an instructor, and when Max is asked about it, he says he believes he was just barely 15, which would mean the mission began in mid to late summer, in the linear year of 1993.

Part of Kyle’s job as a trainer involved occasionally running field missions with his trainees, in order to give them experience for their coming jobs. The orders to do this, and the basic mission parameters, were handed down through the Fort Worden net, from somewhere among the higher-ups of Project Phoenix, or perhaps even the AI itself. None of the instructors

quite knew where they came from, nor did they think it would be approved of to ask.

This mission was to occur in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1956, in the then newly formed Republic of Vietnam, (South Vietnam) in order to assist the Republic's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, in exterminating certain alien communities living deep in the jungles of the country, where they had been protected by the tribal mountain societies for centuries, and largely undisturbed. These communities were, it was suspected, passing off-planet weaponry to pro-Northern insurgents in the South, making their removal necessary, according to the powers as they stood at the time. While the Vietnam war was lost for the South in linear time, this was still considered a needed training mission, as Project Phoenix had for many years had the goal of changing the outcome of the war in the South's favor.

For this mission, Kyle was told to select a pair of assets, advanced in training, to accompany him. Kyle chose Max and Harune, partly out of a somewhat selfish desire to spend time with his sons, but also because he genuinely thought them to be suited for the scenario. And so, upon receiving the order, he gathered them from the class they were currently in, on one of the cliff sides, and brought them to the apartment to pack a basic bag for their trip to Vietnam.

"Why is it always the fucking jungle?" Harune grumbled when he learned of the location.

"That's where the shit of the universe hides," Max said in what was apparently meant to be a satisfactory answer.

Kyle and the boys packed, then headed for one of the gates, known colloquially as the "custom gate," meaning that it could be opened to any location which the user desired. The monster Stargate which stood in the bay was also of this variety, however, the one which participants called the "custom gate"

was personal sized. It was kept in a small bunker, off the water-front, and unmarked. One would enter the bunker and show their orders to the operator, who would then input the coordinates on a computer which stood on a stand beside the gate, and the gate itself would open, allowing them passage to whatever their destination was.

Kyle, Max, and Harune did this, and entered through the opened gate, emerging into their destination; the Presidential Palace of the Republic of Vietnam.

They arrived, as it turned out, right in the entry hall. A grand marble space with gold footed marble columns and a red carpet laid down the middle. Were he a different man, Kyle might have felt a bit out of place here in his dirty combat boots, worn cargo pants, and flight jacket. But being what he was, he rather more felt disgust at such an ostentatious display.

Standing in the entry hall, evidently awaiting Kyle and company, were a group of five men. At the front of them, in a tailored French suit, stood Ngo Dinh Diem himself, and behind him stood four highly decorated generals, in full dress uniform.

"This is what they sent us to work with?" one of the generals muttered.

"Yes, it is," Kyle said, never one to lose an opportunity to shock those who thought he didn't understand their words. "Unless you don't want us here."

"Of course not, Mr- is it Dellschau?" Diem said stepping forward, his hand outstretched.

"So as I'm led to believe," Kyle said. "These are my colleagues, Max Bronsley and Harune Arasaka."

"It had to be a fucking Jap," muttered another general.

"I still understand you," Kyle said, with a condescending smile.

“We’re pleased to meet you all, and have your help,” Diem said, as if nothing was happening. “Do you wish to begin immediately, or settle in?”

“If it’s all the same, I think we’d rather start,” Max said, speaking up for the first time. Kyle felt a slight surge of pride.

“As you wish,” Diem said.

With that, Diem escorted Kyle and the generals from the entry hall, to somewhere deep inside the palace; a map room. Here, the remainder of the mission was laid out.

In the deep mountain provinces, aliens had been dwelling for centuries, possibly millennia, and mostly consisted of species which looked like animal-human chimeras of various kinds. It was thought by the South Vietnamese government (based on their American advisors) that these aliens were accessing their colonies via gates in the forest which opened intermittently and were impossible to track due to the interference caused by the thick forests.

Kyle and sons were to lead a group of (non-enhanced) Vietnamese soldiers on a gradual march through these alien settlements, expected to take several months. Occasionally, Kyle and the boys would be returned to Saigon, where they’d live as expatriates during this period.

“What’s in it for us?” Harune asked bluntly at the end of the meeting, to Kyle’s shock and awe.

“Excuse me?” one of the generals, who Kyle believes was called Tran, asked.

“Well,” Harune said, “we’re doing all of these favors for you. What’s in it for us?”

“Pride,” Diem said decisively. “The knowledge that you’re helping a great nation to survive.”

“Not good enough,” Harune said. “We want an income. Finances. Security. You’ll pay for our room and board, and give us a supplemental income. A good one. Or else we walk.”

Of course, “walking” was most likely not an option. They’d been ordered to be here on Project Phoenix’s behalf, and to refuse to follow this order would have very possibly resulted in death. However, by the looks on their faces, Diem and the others had no idea of this, and revealed what Kyle had known since first arriving; that the President of this little republic and his comrades were, in their hearts of hearts, scared little men who were playing with powers beyond their capacity to understand. They were, to put it simply, insecure and emasculated, which made them very easy to manipulate. Kyle, as always, was impressed and slightly shocked at Harune’s insight.

“Very well,” one of the generals said at last, “we’ll cover your room and board. Your other expenses are your own affair.”

With that, the deal was sealed. Kyle and sons were given a small briefcase containing a nominal sum of cash, as well as some small guns, and a list of recommended locations where they could find cheap housing. Kyle took out a small amount of the cash and pocketed it, and then himself, Max, and Harune were essentially dumped on the streets of Saigon, to find their own way.

Kyle and sons instantly found themselves very taken with the city, so much so, that one of the first things Kyle did was step into a shop and buy a cheap camera and a few rolls of film. The first district they saw was, of course, the upscale one which surrounded the Presidential Palace, with its colonial mansions, opera houses, international hotels, cocktail bars, and finely dressed women in pedicabs. Next came what Kyle would call “the real Saigon,” with its street food, Buddhist temples, traditional shops, and oceans of bicycles.

Kyle flagged down a tuk-tuk after he and the boys had walked a few blocks. The driver spoke French, and Kyle chose to speak it back. He didn't wish to make too much of a novelty of himself by speaking Vietnamese as a white man.

In the end, Kyle, Max, and Harune chose to settle in a three bedroom flat overlooking a shopping street in Saigon's Chinatown, known as Cho Lon. Max wished to practice his Cantonese, and anyway, it seemed to be the best place which was willing to rent to a foreigner. Though the rent was no doubt eye-watering for most locals, Kyle knew it was no issue to the government and the salary they'd pay.

"Right then," Kyle said once he'd paid the deposit and been handed the keys to the apartment, leases being apparently unnecessary, "what do we do first? This is part of your training."

A pause.

"Locate weapons?" Harune suggested at last.

"Wrong! First we eat," Kyle said. "The food here is the cheapest I've ever seen. Let's see how good it is."

The food, as it happened, was the best Kyle had ever eaten, beating even Paris and Hong Kong in quality and taste. After dinner, Kyle also had the honor of buying Harune his first beer. Harune hated the taste, but understood the ritual.

Kyle, Max, and Harune settled into Saigon very well, as it turned out. It wasn't difficult to get paid for odd jobs here and there, which kept them able to eat very well and enjoy the occasional indulgence. Not only was commercial sex very available, it also happened to be very cheap, and so Kyle was quite satisfied.

One evening, after their dinner, Kyle, Max, and Harune found themselves in a French art deco bar, patronized mostly by wealthy ethnic Chinese residents of Saigon. So impressed and amused were they by Max's command of the Cantonese

language, that they wanted him to sing a song. After much prodding, Max finally did so, singing a song in Cantonese which he himself had written at Fort Worden. The song was the following number, presented in Mandarin, as this is the version which is publicly available on Earth.

Xun xun mi mi
zai wu sheng wu xi zhong xiao shi
zong shi zhao bu dao hui yi
zhao bu dao zeng bei yi wang di zhen shi
yi sheng yi shi di guo qu
ni yi dian yi di de yi qi
tong ku tong bei tong xin
tong hen tong shi qu ni

Ye xu fen kai bu rong yi
ye xu xiang qin xiang ai bu ke yi
tong ku tong bei tong xin
tong hen tong shi zi ji
qing shen yuan qian bu de yi
ni wo ye zhi dao qu zhen xi
zhi hao deng zai lai sheng li

Zai ta shang bi ci gu shi di kai shi

Sheng sheng shi shi
zai wu qiong wu jin di meng li
ou er fan qi liao ri ji
fan qi liao ni wo zhi jian di gu shi
yi duan yi duan di hui yi
hui yi yi jing mei you yi yi
tong ku tong bei tong xin

tong hen tong shi qu ni

Ye xu fen kai bu rong yi
ye xu xiang qin xiang ai bu ke yi
tong ku tong bei tong xin
tong hen tong shi zi ji
qing shen yuan qian bu de yi
ni wo ye zhi dao qu zhen xi
zhi hao deng zai lai sheng li

Zai ta shang bi ci gu shi di kai shi

Sheng sheng shi shi
zai wu qiong wu jin di meng li
ou er fan qi liao ri ji
fan qi liao ni wo zhi jian di gu shi
yi duan yi duan di hui yi
hui yi yi jing mei you yi yi
tong ku tong bei tong xin
tong hen tong shi qu ni

Ye xu fen kai bu rong yi
ye xu xiang qin xiang ai bu ke yi
tong ku tong bei tong xin
tong hen tong shi zi ji
qing shen yuan qian bu de yi
ni wo ye zhi dao qu zhen xi
zhi hao deng zai lai sheng li
zai ta shang bi ci gu shi di kai shi

Xhi hao deng zai lai sheng li
Zai ta shang bi ci gu shi di kai shi

The patrons were very pleased by this, and free drinks were offered. Due to it and probably several other factors, the evening developed into a kind of informal party, and Kyle rather lost sight of Max and Harune for a few hours. Eventually, they regrouped and returned to their apartment.

The next morning, Kyle was standing in the dining room, pouring over a map. He found himself doing this quite a lot on this mission, for reasons that will soon be explained. As he was reading, Max walked in, still in the boxers and tank top which they all slept in while in this hot environment.

Max: "Good morning, Dad."

Kyle: "Good morning, Son. There's breakfast ingredients in the icebox if you're hungry."

Max: "Thank you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kyle saw that Max didn't move, and so Kyle looked up fully, seeing that Max looked slightly troubled.

Kyle: "Something on your mind Mi Pequeño?"

Max seemed to contemplate for a moment before he finally spoke.

Max: "Well, Dad. I lost my virginity."

Kyle smiled with a mix of surprise and fatherly pride.

Kyle: "Congratulations, Kid."

Max: "Are you not..... upset?"

Kyle couldn't help laughing.

Kyle: "Why would I be mad? I'm proud of you. When did it happen?"

Max: "Last night, at the club."

Kyle: "Well, I'm proud of you. You're a man now! Do you want to talk about it more? Is there anything you don't know?"

“Not that I need to hear from my Dad,” Max said, chuckling. Kyle understood.

“Alright. Then would you either please cook breakfast or help me read this fucking map?” Kyle said good-naturedly.

Maps were incredibly important to this mission, as it took place in an era before satellite imagery. These operations, as has been mentioned, were taking place deep within the innermost mountain provinces of south-central Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government of the 1950s was stuck with the maps which they’d inherited from the French government, who had only recently decolonized Indochina. This posed severe problems for the new republic, as not only were the maps of foreign origin, they were severely outdated, as the French had not done any kind of thorough survey or cartographic study of the area since before the First World War. While Harune was perfectly capable of remote viewing these locations, with 100% accuracy, this was not trusted locally. As a result, the assets were cursed to pour over these ancient maps before every mission.

As I’ve described many raiding missions already, it would be fairly redundant to do so here in great detail. Kyle saw a number of alien species, mostly those described in UFO literature as “Chimeras,” meaning humanoid forms of various animals; gopher humanoids, snake humanoids (Naga), bear humanoids, an array of lizard humanoids, as well as massive blue worms which didn’t appear sentient. They were forced to fight with Terran weapons only, meaning French and Japanese WWII surplus guns and some contemporary American guns. Harune, as ever, shone through in his psionics, and without them, as well as Kyle and Max’s enhancements, the fights couldn’t have been won.

While Kyle enjoyed his time in Vietnam, he felt considerable guilt at the wholesale killing of the aliens, aggressive in battle

though they were. This caused a certain exopolitical shift in Kyle, namely that he grew to be very critical of the entire notion of “gate control” and those who were killed in its path.

The campaign took about six months, as predicted. Kyle, Max, and Harune walked away from it with a newfound respect for the people of Vietnam, and a newfound disrespect for their government. This wouldn't be Kyle's last adventure in the land of the Non La, but that, dear readers, is a story for another day.

***Author's note. A fairly lighthearted chapter, to be sure. I chose to indulge in it in order to make up for the rather down-beat nature of the past few chapters, particularly the preceding one. ***

Chapter 10

I suppose it now falls on me to describe, at last, Kyle's position as an instructor at Fort Worden and what it entailed.

Kyle's training specialized in the paramilitary arts, such as the use of guns and handheld weaponry, and in a few martial arts. Kyle also trained his assets in all aspects of survival. How to hunt and forage for food, how to find and purify water, how to build a shelter, and so on.

Kyle's students ranged in ages from five to 13 when they started, were of both sexes and all races, and spoke any number of languages. To keep things manageable, Kyle gave his main classes in English, German, Spanish, Canadian French, and Japanese, saying what needed to be said in as few words as necessary in each of those languages, as they were the most commonly spoken among his students. Those who didn't speak any of them had to either rely on telepathy or ask for private classes. In all, Kyle trained thousands upon thousands of children. I will now go into some specifics.

In addition to his own duties, Kyle had to coordinate with the other instructors present to discuss the progress being made by certain students. Other instructors at Fort Worden included Anya Mittelbraun, who instructed in defense psionics. Cereza Alvarez, (mentioned in the previous volume) trained in the art of psionic disguise. A man called Frank Spencer trained in various espionage arts. An Arcturian ("tall green") with the humorous callsign of Tannenbaum instructed students on alien interaction.

For better or worse, Kyle developed a very visible harsher side. At the time, he thought it necessary to be harsh with his students, even violently unfair. His thinking was that what came in the field would always be worse than he ever could be. He now regrets certain instances of this roughness, such as one occasion when one of his trainees, a very young Native American girl, begged him to stop in the middle of a sparring exercise, wherein he was also screaming abuses as she might hear on the battlefield. Kyle had pretended to relent, then resumed his assault. The girl had required a dip in the regeneration tank.

“You really fucked up, Dad.” Max had bluntly told him later.

“Kid, if I’m not like this, someone else will be far worse,” Kyle had replied, trying to believe it.

Kyle’s racial biases also reared their heads here. While he never used racist terminology in front of his students, he certainly was prone to showing his prejudices in the way he scored and spoke about his students in conference with his fellow instructors. I’ll give an example.

At some point in the early 1990s, Nacht Waffen was specifically searching for possible candidates for a program known in English as “Project Ampersand.” This was some kind of program to distribute weapons to certain alien allies of Nacht Waffen on these aliens’ home planets. This would enable Nacht Waffen to withdraw troops from a few such planets, allowing them to redraw efforts towards other, more pressing engagements. Candidates for Project Ampersand would require very high levels of telepathy, as well as a very good understanding of multiple types of weaponry, and the capability to adapt to truly alien environments.

As often happened, Nacht Waffen recruiters would descend on various bases within the various Earth nations under their

thumb, seeking candidate assets. Captain Emmerich Jensen, who claimed Project Ampersand as his brainchild, happened to come by Fort Worden, continuing what had always been common in Project Phoenix, and remained common even under Jimmy; namely, various project and faction recruiters descending on base and seeking assets, asking instructors and handlers for children who'd suit their requirements for each program. The recruiters (at least those from Nacht Waffen) would hand their lists of requirements, and a basic rundown of the program, to each instructor, and the instructors would create lists. At the end of the day, the recruiters would carry out individual interviews with each instructor, to hash out their lists.

"Your list is very informative," Captain Jensen said, "I do have a question; nearly everyone else mentioned the names of two sisters. Mary and Elizabeth McCarthy. You didn't, Herr Dellschau. Why?"

Kyle nearly snorted.

"I wouldn't wish to see your colony disgraced by their presence, Captain Jensen," Kyle said.

Kyle's reasoning, of course, was that Mary and Elizabeth McCarthy, a pair of twins who'd come into Project Phoenix perhaps a year prior, were black Americans. Kyle knew that were they picked up by Nacht Waffen specifically, they'd not only come to work in Nacht Waffen, but they'd also be taken and raised in a colony and have citizenship within Der Bund. Kyle, in his mindset, couldn't see that happen when he could help it. The McCarthy sisters hadn't even entered his mind as possibilities for use in Project Ampersand.

This is but one example of such discrimination against his students' opportunities which Kyle engaged in that happens to stand out in memory. There were plenty of others.

The use of the portal system at Fort Worden was invaluable in Kyle's training, in fact it was necessary. All terrain survival can only be trained for in all terrains, and with the portal system, it was very possible to access any environment.

For training in the desert, Kyle would take his students through a permanent portal to a secret archaeological site in the Empty Quarter, in Saudi Arabia. Kyle and assets would trek from the site further into the desert. Here, Kyle would teach them to find water, to create dugout shelters, to hunt for lizards and edible insects, and use several devices, such as one which looked like a thermos and recycled urine into drinkable water.

When training in the tundra, Kyle would escort the assets to a tundra planet known as Arlenska. Here, he'd train them not only in how to survive in extreme cold, but how to hunt for food, how to make use of pelts and fat, how to fashion spears, bows, and arrows from wood and rocks, how to identify edible plants using a testing kit (provided in the equipment they'd receive when loading out), and so on.

Perhaps the most exciting (and dangerous) bit of training was that for "survival in environments incompatible with sentient life." Apparently the most "incompatible" place that the designers of the training program, whomever they might have been, could think of was the jungles of Centurion, where everything, even the plant life, was carnivorous and would attack on sight.

To prepare to train the assets in this environment, Kyle made a trip there himself, having Jimmy instruct the operator of the monster portal to open a gateway to a random point on Centurion. Kyle then flew Prometheus through the opening, landing her in the random location and disembarking, armed with only his combat knife and a bow with a few arrows.

For a fortnight, Kyle survived in these jungles, fighting carnivorous monkeys, red scorpions the size of a Saint Bernard, vines with flowers which shot poison sprouts, massive eagles which would pick up even a large human with ease, and extremely aggressive piranha-like fish the size of a small sturgeon which would even go so far as to fly from the water and crawl on their fins to chase their prey. All these, and many more, Kyle battled with.

Kyle survived in this environment for the entire fortnight, all the while using only his basic tools. He never used his telekinesis, and restrained himself to only using the strength level of an average human. He also hunted for food and ate as though he were an average human. He logged all information on how he did this in a little notebook he'd brought with him, and kept it for his students. If he could do it, even with such severe restrictions, then his students could learn to as well.

The exercise went thus; a portal would be opened using the "custom gate." Kyle would then fly his students, blindfolded, through the monster gate which opened a few kilometers away from the custom gate. The students then had three days to make their way to and through the custom gate, no excuses. If they died, their bodies would be picked up and regenerated, and they'd have to do the exercise again. Likewise if they failed to reach the gate in the set time.

Kyle being Kyle, he had a deep fondness and protectiveness for all the assets whom he trained, knowing full well that they'd been ripped from "normal" lives across time and space to do their service. The training program typically lasted six to eight months, at which point, most would transfer, being picked up by one faction or another for the endless job mill off-world.

One boy stands out in Kyle's memory among the rest; a tiny blue-eyed Mexican boy by the name of Pablo Enriquez. Pablo

was an incredibly talented child in all disciplines he was trained in, and became a friend of Harune's, often eating at the Dellschau household's apartment.

On one occasion, when training in urban survival, Kyle was with his students at a spaceport on some rimward planet, with Pablo among them. Pablo happened to be holding Kyle's hand, and for a moment, Kyle let go, for reasons he's forgotten. When Kyle looked down again, Pablo was gone, and never did Kyle ever see him again, nor did other Project Phoenix assets.

Letting go of his trainees every six months was the hardest part of the job for Kyle, and indeed most of the other instructors.

One of Kyle's trainees who wound up staying was Joshua McBride, or "Joshie," mentioned a few chapters previously, who'd transferred from Cheyenne Mountain to Fort Worden about six months after Kyle had done so. He'd immediately rekindled his friendship with Harune, and it turned out, he had an incredible musical talent, the likes of which Kyle is certain he'd never seen before or since, particularly in his voice. Many singers have been described as "divine" or "angelic," but Joshie truly deserved those praises and more.

"Joshie," Kyle suggested one evening over dinner in 1992, "what if you wrote a song for the graduates?"

"Something to remember us by?" Joshie said with interest.

"Yes," Kyle replied. "I'm sure I could have a keyboard or something brought from the recording studio."

Much like Camp Hero, Fort Worden had a recording studio on base, and Jimmy had kept the strict rule in place that all songs written by any Project Phoenix asset must be recorded. The AI would put up no resistance on that front.

"I like that idea," Joshie had said.

The song which Joshie wrote developed into the following. The recording which audiobook listeners will now hear, while it's certainly beautiful, doesn't touch Joshie's rendition. I can only hope that someday the readers are lucky enough to hear his original.

As you find your way through this life you make
I hope you live each day for all it's worth
Go where your heart leads and dream your biggest dreams

All of these things I will pray for you

I will pray for you, I will pray for you
Through every darkness, through every light
This road ahead of you, I cannot carry you
But I can promise I will pray for you

If a love so true breaks your heart in two
And it hurts so much that you can't forgive
And even the smallest step feels like miles away
But you'll get there one day, I will pray for you

I will pray for you, I will pray for you
Through every darkness, through every light
This road ahead of you, I cannot carry you
But I can promise I will pray for you

So if you ever start to wonder
If you're in this world alone
I'll be there to help you over
If you lose your way
If you lose your faith

When your time is through
my final wish for you
Is to count your blessings, not your regrets
With peace inside your soul
And all that heaven holds
I hope you always know

I will pray for you

There wasn't a dry eye in the room all the many times Joshie would play this at various graduations of assets. For once, his Catholicism was not considered offensive and even criminal, which was a sore point with him.

One of the darker elements of Kyle's job was that he was required, eventually, to engage in the infamous "supply runs," the euphemism for abductions of children for training in Project Phoenix and eventual service off-world. Kyle was unaware he'd be required to do this until after he'd arrived at Fort Worden, as there were no students for him at the time. Eventually, he was called to Ivan Roth's office, via his glass pad as usual. With a groan, Kyle stood and made the necessary trek.

Roth's office branched off the inside of one of the walls which ran along the inside of the fort proper, facing into the cedar forest. With its fireproof door painted with a goat's head motif, it was unmissable. Kyle didn't bother to knock before entering the concrete room with Roth's oak desk in the center, the walls plastered with music posters and photos of Roth in various exotic locations. Roth in the flesh stood from his desk at Kyle's abrupt entry.

"What the hell do you want?" Kyle demanded.

“Good afternoon to you too!” Roth said in a false cordial voice. “Time for a business chat.”

The discussion which followed was rather traumatic, and both Kyle and myself struggle to relay it word for word. Suffice to say, Kyle learned of the “need” for “supply runs,” and that he’d be required to help carry them out on occasion. Roth presented this remorselessly, almost humorously, in his usual fashion. With the conversation over, Kyle once again delivered a bone-breaking kick to Roth’s crotch, then left. Roth never learned.

The process of a “supply run” was painfully simple. Kyle and usually Roth, with sometimes another of any number of persons would climb into one of the infamous black vans, to which the license plates of the country they were visiting had been attached, and would drive through a portal to any number of sites. These included downtown Toronto, Canada, the Victoria and Albert Waterfront in Cape Town, South Africa, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, California, Alexanderplatz in Berlin, Germany, The Ginza in Tokyo, Japan, and countless others, in every Western Bloc nation.

Upon arriving at the site, a device would be aimed at the child being targeted. The device looked more or less like an old fashioned walkie-talkie, with a long wire antenna. The operator would press a combination on the number pad of the device, and the marked child would enter a fugue state, and develop an urge to move in the direction of the frequency. If their parents or any adult guardians were with them, they’d also be affected by the frequency. Thus, the children would practically walk right into the arms of Project Phoenix. Upon entering the van, the children would be given an injection to the neck of some kind of heavy sedative, followed by another injection of a heavy dose of Scopolamine to erase all memories of their life previously, which varied wildly in terms of success.

On occasion, the abductors would have photographs of specific children who were wanted. More often, the abductions were random, and simply targeted certain ethnic groups. Aryan, Celtic, East Asian, indigenous American, and children who were a mix of these were the ones preferred for these random “supply runs.”

This, at least, was the standard for “supply runs” taking place in contemporary times. Other runs took place in various periods in the past, and could be either much simpler or much more complicated.

“Supply runs” taking place in agrarian locations in the past were quite simple. The abductors could simply park near a farm, out of sight, and carry out their usual procedure, with virtually no chance of discovery. In urban areas, it was usually necessary to rent a room or take over a cabin, in which the portal back to Fort Worden would be opened. Notably, Kyle never witnessed Project Phoenix abducting people from their bedrooms.

One fairly memorable set of “supply runs” which Kyle participated in was those which occurred in Nguyen Dynasty Vietnam, throughout the dynasty’s history. Due to treaties which were never explained to Kyle, “supply runs” took place here only by receiving official lists of targets from the emperor himself.

To get these lists, Kyle and usually Roth would present themselves to the emperors, in the so-called “Forbidden Purple City” in Hue. Here, disguised as Portuguese and eventually French traders, they would present gifts to the emperors, usually alien artifacts and pieces of technology from what to the emperors was the future. Of course, the artifacts were mere trinkets, and the technology was useless in this era, but they were still incredible novelties which the emperors could have never possibly seen in any other context, and the fact that they could

keep them for themselves, out of sight of the masses, was an added bonus for them.

In exchange for these gifts, the emperors would house Kyle and whoever was with him in the “Forbidden Purple City” and send out Mandarins and soldiers to find children fitting the parameters set out in the lists given them by the Project Phoenix visitors, namely, psionic children.

One very noteworthy group of assets (and one in particular) I’d like to draw attention to is the Cheng family, acquired in 1877, from a list provided by Emperor Tu Duc.

The Cheng family were Chinese migrant workers, who had come from Guangdong Province to assist in the building of the railway through Vietnam. They’d had seven children, all girls, four of them quadruplets, and the rest all born within a year of each other, with the last two in Vietnam. According to the information brought by the Mandarin, the women of the family were from a long line of oracles, meaning that psionic prowess was essentially guaranteed.

All seven of the Cheng girls were taken by Project Phoenix. Kyle and Roth presented themselves to the family directly, disguised as educators from the west building a girl’s school in Hanoi, and the family had sent the girls willingly. The four eldest were all aged 10, the youngest was 6.

While her story is yet to come, I’d like to draw the reader’s attention to the youngest one. Her name was Cheng Li Hua, or her western adopted name of Iridia Cheng. She was the only one to stay within Project Phoenix, and would eventually become pivotal to Kyle’s story. But that’s a story for another time.

A very triggering chapter for many readers, I’m sure. Quite necessary however, and certain elements of it must be remembered going forward.

Chapter 11

As time went on, Kyle's period of relative relaxation was slowly coming to a close, as Emmermann began once again to have designs on power in certain parts of the galaxy. One of these developed in what must have been around mid to late 1989, and I'm about to describe it.

Kyle was seated in his apartment after a day of work. His glass pad lit up, and began emitting its annoying alarm-like sound, indicating a call. Kyle answered, and was greeted by Georg's face, Georg being seated on a rather luxurious looking couch in a large, dark wood paneled room.

"Brother!" Kyle exclaimed. "Everything's alright I hope?"

"Quite alright," Georg said, "in fact, our benefactor wants you."

"With company?" Kyle asked, referring to Max and Harune.

"Yes," Georg said. "And Jack too, I'll call him next."

"When's the pick up?" Kyle asked.

"Tomorrow after lights on," Georg explained, "so pack tonight."

The men chatted for a bit, and eventually, Kyle stood and explained to the boys what was to happen. Max seemed slightly pleased, as it most likely meant a vacation for himself, whilst Harune seemed rather perturbed.

Kyle and the boys packed, and in the morning headed towards the landing beach, meeting Jack and Andrew along the way, Andrew by this point being 14 years old, two years older than Max and one year older than Harune. Andrew never tired of reminding them that he was older and therefore, by his own

estimation, wiser than they'd ever be. All in good fun of course, and Kyle and Jack had taken to encouraging such friendly competition, in the classic Germanic way.

As usual, one of Emmermann's shipping container-esque ships arrived, and as usual, Georg was on board. I've described this general procedure many times, so I'll avoid repeating myself. As always, the ship "jumped," and wound up in the orbit of a planet, this one looking mostly oceanic and quite sizable, dotted with the occasional archipelago.

"Well I'll be fucked!" Andrew exclaimed at the site of it. "Is that New Atlantis?"

"Yes it is," Georg said. "The Old Man had a hankering to be near an ocean."

"Looks like he's got nothing but," Kyle observed.

The ship circled the planet a ways, aiming towards a small archipelago just to the north of the planet's equator, eventually aiming for the largest island in sight, and towards a long beach into the island's southwest, the island itself being covered by thickly jungled mountains and mesas. The beach had a number of crafts, of varying sizes and designs, and Emmermann himself was seated in the driver's seat of a hovering jeep, which he exited to approach the others as they alighted from the ship. Humorously, Emmermann was dressed in a red and white Hawaiian shirt and black shorts. It was the first time Kyle had seen this much of Emmermann exposed, and he saw that Emmermann was authentically as slim and muscular as the uniform made him look.

"Greetings! Merry Jul!" Emmermann exclaimed rushing towards the group, and Andrew rushed forward to meet his grandfather. Andrew was, perhaps, the only one truly fond of Emmermann.

"Another grand soirée?" Kyle asked.

“No,” Emmermann said, “in fact, I thought I’d spend this holiday as alone. Well mostly, except for my favorite people.”

At these last words, Emmermann looked over to his grandsons. Kyle observed that Andrew smiled, Max pretended he didn’t hear, and Harune rolled his eyes in open contempt.

“What an idea,” Kyle said diplomatically, smiling and stepping in front of Harune before Emmermann had a chance to see the contempt. “And the rest of us plebeians?”

“That’s what we have yet to discuss,” Emmermann said. “Shall we go back to the house?”

They all piled into the jeep. Emmermann, in spite of his immense wealth and the fact that this was a vacation home, was not letting anyone forget the military nature of their lives or that it was what paid their allowances, meager though they were.

Emmermann drove the jeep up the beach for a distance, then turned into a tunnel carved through one of the jungled mountains the beach was at the foot of. The road through the mountain snaked, eventually emerging into what seemed to be a large beached cove, surrounded by high cliffs, and containing Emmermann’s New Atlantis estate.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Emmermann said at the sight.

“She’s certainly something,” Max said dryly, in obvious sarcasm.

The estate was a collection of five alien buildings. Huge, white egg-shaped alien buildings, each about 40 feet in height, and several hundred feet across, with domed glass roofs. Five mansions, for all intents and purposes, all with ocean views and instant beach access.

Emmermann stopped in front of the first house of the bunch. He instructed Georg to show Jack and the boys to their rooms while he continued with Kyle. As always, Kyle was being

isolated, and for that matter so were the others, their missions being kept separate and out of mind.

Emmermann drove further along to another building, now just himself and Kyle in the jeep, Georg even taking Kyle's duffle bag into the house. Emmermann didn't seem very talkative at first, and so Kyle simply looked at the incredible tropical scenery stretching before them.

"I hope you brought a pair of shorts," Emmermann said with a chuckle.

Kyle hadn't. He supposed he'd be cutting down a pair of pants, then swimming nude for however long he'd be here.

"Do they have women on this planet?" Kyle asked.

"I always bring women. Help yourself once our meeting is over," Emmermann said.

Kyle had to admit; The Old Man was quite a host, and with his employees he knew just when to implement the carrot rather than the stick.

Emmermann pulled up in front of the third egg-shaped house of the group, saying this was his personal house. Kyle and Emmermann alighted from the jeep and entered, the 12 foot high door opening automatically upon approach. The inside had been renovated into a typical Prussian mansion, though the ceilings and doors were quite high. Emmermann led Kyle a ways through the house, to Emmermann's office. It was the usual for his offices; large, lined with bookshelves containing books in numerous languages, and a stately desk with a luxurious wingback chair behind it.

Without a word, Emmermann sat behind his desk and faced Kyle, who stood opposite him.

Kyle: "What is this about, Sir?"

Emmermann reached under the desk and picked up an object which he placed on the desk; a navy blue power armor helmet

with a reflective glass front, the rest made of metal and carbon alloy.

“Armor of the enemy,” Kyle observed, noting an American flag inlaid in the iridescent paint job.

“Precisely,” Emmermann said. “The best ever made. Kyle, do you carry a gun?”

“Of course,” Kyle said.

“Show it to me,” Emmermann said.

With a shrug, Kyle pulled his concealed pistol from his waist-band, a snub nosed .357 Magnum revolver, given him as a Christmas present by Tsurabaya, who’d gotten it as a surplus from some base or other. It was one of the few things Kyle had which truly belonged to him.

“Very nice gun,” Emmermann observed, “I’m sure you know your guns, Kyle. Can you tell me what this is?”

With this, Emmermann opened his desk drawer and pulled out another gun, this one a semi-automatic.

“It’s a SIG P226,” Kyle said. “Very good gun, I train with them. May I?”

“Be my guest,” Emmermann said. Kyle picked up the gun and began examining it.

“It’s a custom job,” Kyle observed. “The mag release has been replaced and greased for easy clip swapping, the trigger weight has been raised, and this hammer is diamond, I suspect. The barrel is reinforced. All to accommodate these ultra high velocity bullets. It’s a great piece. It’ll fuck up any terrestrial armor I know, or take down a rhinoceros.”

“Yes,” Emmermann said, and pulled another gun from the desk, this one larger, and of light yellow metal. A more full sized handgun than the SIG, but otherwise not very notable.

“I don’t believe I’m familiar with that model,” Kyle said.

“Please, take a look,” Emmermann instructed, “but don’t pull the tape off, the model is a surprise. I just want your analysis as an expert.”

Kyle picked up the gun and began inspecting it, dismantling it like the second nature it was to him.

Kyle: “It’s magnificent. The barrel is reinforced steel, the slide is something even more unbreakable. Aerated ferrocen alloy, if I’m not mistaken. The chassis is also made of this, and the under barrel picatinny rail allows for easy attachment of a laser sight or some such. The magwell is greased for easy slipping in and out of clips. The clip size is also impressive. 30 round double stack magazine. The rubber on the grip is good, and I can feel it’s weighted so as to minimize recoil. I could go on, but I’d like to get to the point, Sir.”

Emmermann laughed.

“Always so to the point. I pity your women,” Emmermann said. Kyle couldn’t help himself but laugh.

Emmermann reached under his desk, and Kyle heard the “click” of a switch being flipped. Almost instantly, a panel with a bookshelf to Kyle’s right swung open, revealing a long white hallway blocked by a waist-high gate. A shooting gallery, at the end of which was a power armor suit of the same type as the helmet that Emmermann had shown.

“Now,” Emmermann said, “I’d like you to try all these guns on that suit, ending with the new model.”

“Your wish is my command,” Kyle said.

Kyle first picked up the .357 Magnum, aiming it at the suit and firing.

Kyle: “Not a scratch. The wearer wouldn’t even notice it.”

Emmermann: “Correct. Now try the SIG.”

Kyle did so. This time the suit twitched very slightly, and Kyle walked closer to inspect it.

Kyle: "Well, there's a dent anyway. Still nowhere near real damage."

Emmermann: "Yes. Now try the last gun."

Kyle picked up the mysterious yellow gun, and to Kyle's shock, the bullet pierced the armor, creating a fairly sizable hole and even an exit wound.

"Holy shit," Kyle marveled.

Unable to resist, Kyle quickly cleared the gun and peeled the bit of red tape off the slide which Emmermann had added. He saw that the gun was a "Fernandes P9-A."

"It's a revolution, Kyle. And Roberto Fernandes is our Parisian mobs, and this gun is our guillotine, slicing off Marie Antoinette's finely coiffured head," Emmermann said. Now had come his theatrical speech time.

"It's a magnificent gun, Sir. Explain how it's a revolution?" Kyle asked.

Emmermann: "Mars, Kyle. We've been fighting a war for 44 years. The barbarians and the Americans both, and now the companies who oppose us, who've given the Americans this godly armor, 11 years ago now. Until now, the only thing that could pierce them was plasma guns, which we can't manufacture and can only buy in small batches due to our lizzy overlord's decrees."

Kyle: "But the Americans can."

Emmermann: "The Americans can. The lizzies let them. They have different treaties which we can't touch. We've spent decades fighting a war on our own soil, and we've been losing. Gods fucking damn it, we're losing, Kyle!"

Emmermann was not emotionless when it came to his arrogance over territory for his "race" and further power and prestige for himself.

Kyle: "But this gun breaks no treaties, and can turn the tide in our favor."

Emmermann: "Exactly. Which is where you come in."

Yet again, Emmermann opened a drawer in his desk. From it, he withdrew a folded piece of paper, which he expanded and laid out on the table. It turned out to be a photo of a middle-aged looking Japanese woman, beautiful and very finely made up, her very aura oozing wealth.

"Ayako Daishono," Emmermann explained, "the head bitch herself."

"Alright," Kyle said. "What's she got to do with this?"

"Simple," Emmermann stated, "she's after Roberto Fernandes. The hit has been sent out. Now, her dogs have no chance of reaching him in his house, best chance is when he goes out on a propaganda campaign. Week from today, from this planet's perspective. You'll leave then, and intercept any assassination attempt."

"And why would you not simply contact him and tell him to remain in the safety of his home?" Kyle demanded.

"Still no understanding of business," Emmermann observed. "It's easy. If you intercept, and he survives, he owes me his life. But I'll settle for a victory in the Mars War."

"Fucking politics," Kyle almost said aloud, just catching himself.

"Well Sir, I suppose I see the point," Kyle lied, "and I look forward to this assignment. What else should I expect?"

"There's time for that later," Emmermann said dismissively. "Go enjoy your vacation in paradise."

And just like that, Kyle was apparently dismissed. Kyle left, walking out of Emmermann's home and onto the beach which he walked along for a ways, eventually seeing several people swimming in the New Atlantis ocean. He squinted and saw that

one of them was Georg, and the others were several young women. All were bare naked. Emmermann, being German, likely didn't believe in swimwear, and therefore didn't provide it for his staff or his guests.

"Well," Kyle thought as he began stripping down, "this is indeed paradise."

Kyle did a running dive into the ocean, finding it warm and less salty than the oceans of Earth. Little fish of all the colors of the rainbow swam in the crystal clear waters, and Kyle was momentarily distracted from the prospect of sex by the fish and general beauty of the waters. As he didn't breathe, Kyle could stay below the water for as long as he wished. Eventually however, he surfaced and found his way to one of the women. A curvaceous blonde, of course. Kyle and the woman went ashore and ducked into some bushes, having a very pleasant interlude as the white dwarf sun began setting.

When all this was over, Kyle returned up the beach and redonned the clothes he'd abandoned, then at last, entered the egg-shaped building which he and the others were apparently staying in. Unlike the house which Emmermann seemed to occupy, this one was more minimalist in its decor, and hadn't been renovated much. It was very comfortable, however, and Emmermann had provided the men a cook, as well as a seemingly infinite supply of Corelian whiskey.

It was Jul season, and so naturally gifts were exchanged. Max and Harune received the first guns they ever properly owned, these being simple single shot rifles, and the boys went fishing with them. Andrew, being older, had already gotten his first gun before this.

Inevitably, as all good things must, the vacation ended. Kyle was swimming on the seventh day, a good distance from shore, when he saw something in the sky; a black triangular shuttle

craft, approaching Emmermann's island. Company had come. Kyle mentally sighed, and began to swim to shore. He swam fairly slowly, and could thus make out Emmermann's jeep driving past, up the beach towards his house. When Kyle reached shore, Jack was standing there, holding Kyle's clothes.

"Who's the invader?" Kyle asked with a glance towards Emmermann's house.

"No fucking idea," Jack said. "Old Man wants you to meet them though. I brought you some clothes that don't smell like the beach."

"I owe you one, asshole," Kyle said, taking the clothes. "What about you, anyway?"

"He's sending Drew and I to the Rim," Jack explained. "I get the sense he's seeing changes coming."

"I guess you could say that," Kyle said distantly, as he began slipping into the clothes Jack had brought.

Kyle sprinted up the beach, reaching Emmermann's house in a matter of moments. The front door slid open to greet him.

"Herr Emmermann will see you," a dark haired maid who was cleaning the entry room said, in a Berlin accent, "would you like me to show you?"

"I know the way," Kyle said with a dismissive wave, already halfway across the room.

Kyle walked through the house, through its winding passages towards Emmermann's office, from which he could hear both Emmermann's voice and another man's, which was very familiar. Kyle opened the door to face the guest.

"Yoshi Arasaka, as I live and breathe," Kyle said.

"Not a great assurance, as you don't do much of either," Yoshi said with a roguish grin. Kyle laughed, and extended his hand, giving Yoshi a hearty handshake. Kyle noticed that Yoshi didn't bow.

“What are you doing here?” Kyle asked.

“I’m here to help you secure my family’s interests,” Yoshi explained. “Daishono Industries is our main rival.”

“Your brother is here,” Kyle said.

“There’s time for all that when the operation is over,” Emmermann briskly cut in. “The armory is down the hall. Load out, take concealed weapons only. Arasaka, you’re taking your ship. It’s private, they won’t search it much.”

“Looks like we’d better move,” Kyle said briskly. “Are we needing money?”

“I brought money,” Yoshi said.

“Take my jeep,” Emmermann said. “I’ll have someone pick it up later.”

Kyle and Yoshi left, going down the hall towards the room conveniently labeled as “armory” by a small metal plaque. Inside, arranged on labeled racks, were various weapons, in a perfectly adequate selection for Kyle and Yoshi to find a few appropriate specimens. Yoshi assured Kyle he had plenty of clothes, having gotten Kyle’s measurements from the Arasaka databank, and so they were ready to leave. With their weapons, which, under Yoshi’s advice, consisted more of plasma blades than guns (though Kyle did take the Fernandes P9A with him), they left, heading to Emmermann’s jeep and driving up the beach, through the mountain tunnel, and to the beach where ships were parked.

Yoshi’s ship was an all black affair, in the shape of a rectangular prism. A loading ramp was already lowered, and so Kyle and Yoshi entered.

The ship was sleek and black on the inside, with two long benches, one on each side, lit by light strips along the edges of the floor and ceiling. At the back were three panels which folded out. The lowest one, Yoshi explained, was a fold out table, and

the two above it were sleeping berths. A replicator was also built into this wall, and on either side at the widest part were two closets; one a combined clothing closet and sonic laundry, and the other, a combined sonic shower and toilet. In the floor were several hatches for storage of whatever one might need, and in the very nose of the ship was the solitary pilot's seat.

It was all very Japanese, Kyle thought to himself, meaning it in a complimentary manner. No wasted space, no unnecessary decoration. Beauty in simplicity and efficiency.

"Welcome to the Kamuri Maru!" Yoshi proudly announced.

"She looks almost good enough to fuck," Kyle said, in repayment for Yoshi's synthetic jab earlier. A shocked silence for a few seconds, and then Yoshi laughed and moved to the front of the ship, to begin setting course for their destination; the colony of Nuevo Cartagena, in the Hercules constellation.

"Tell me," Yoshi said as he began fiddling with instruments, "how is Harune?"

"I'm surprised you'd even ask," Kyle said in a resentful tone.

"Kyle," Yoshi said with a snicker, "not all of us share my father's undying devotion to superstitious Chinese horseshit. We've got a long flight, you can tell me about Harune on the way."

With that, Yoshi sat in the pilot's seat, flipping down the helmet which covered his eyes and presumably allowed him to see to navigate. The ship lifted and flew through the atmosphere of New Atlantis, at which point Yoshi fiddled with a series of more controls, flipped back the helmet, got up, then sat down again on the bench opposite the one Kyle had sat on.

"We've got a 16 hour flight," Yoshi said, "I hope you're good at conversation."

"Your ship doesn't jump?" Kyle asked.

"No," Yoshi explained, "it has a bubble drive."

To explain to the reader; a “bubble drive” is what most readers will know as a “warp drive” or an “Alcubierre drive,” meaning that the ship is encased in a bubble during flight, allowing faster-than-light travel. Of course, the term “warp drive” is a product of 1960s science fiction, and the use of such technology greatly predates both the science fiction and its discovery by Miguel Alcubierre.

Kyle was, of course, a decent conversationalist, and so he and Yoshi had a pleasant enough trip. Kyle told Yoshi all about how Harune was settling into his new life, how he was progressing in his training, his psionic prowess, and so on. Yoshi seemed relieved by the whole thing.

Yoshi, for his part, told Kyle some very interesting things about the Arasaka bloodline. About his father’s unending infidelities, about his sister Sakura’s occult endeavors (blood magic rituals on small animals), and his mother’s arrangements of her children’s marriages.

“Why are you running this mission?” Kyle asked at one point. “Aren’t you their little golden boy?”

Yoshi doubled over with laughter at this comment.

“They don’t like me,” Yoshi said flatly. “I’m not a businessman, and I’m not Japanese enough.”

Apparently this was a good enough explanation, as Yoshi changed the subject and Kyle didn’t insist. Eventually, Kyle and Yoshi stretched out on the benches and fell asleep. They were awoken by a beeping from the ship’s console.

“Looks like that’s us,” Yoshi said, standing from the bench. “Have you ever been to Nuevo Cartagena?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to this constellation,” Kyle confessed, “what is it like?”

“Nothing too special,” Yoshi said. “They worship Fernandes here though. They call him Tío Bobby. It’ll be difficult to get

close to him at this outing. Get geared up, we'll be landing soon."

With that, Yoshi retook the pilot's seat, and began piloting the ship, presumably onto the planet they'd arrived in orbit of, and towards the spaceport of Nuevo Cartagena, such as it might be.

"Being an Arasaka has its benefits," Yoshi said after a moment. "They'd have scanned the ship's registration number when we entered the atmosphere. If we'd been Untermensch, they'd have had us stop and be boarded."

"Money gets you everything," Kyle said sarcastically, busily laying out the weapons they'd brought. "Should I bring the Motherfucker?"

"I beg your pardon?" Yoshi asked, rising from the pilot's seat, having apparently landed the Kamuri Maru.

"The Motherfucker," Kyle said, smiling. "It's what I've decided to call Fernandes' new gun. I'm hoping it sticks."

"Yes, bring the Motherfucker," Yoshi said, laughing and shaking his head.

The men concealed their weapons, at which point Yoshi pressed a few more buttons on the console, causing the Kamuri Maru's loading ramp to lower. Once Yoshi took a few wads of cash from inside the floor storage, the two stepped out. The bills were called "Pesetas," and had images of Simon Bolivar. They didn't take any extra clothes.

Nuevo Cartagena proved to be a fairly standard spaceport, with a series of landing pads and a monorail train running between them, each landing pad having a fence around it, at the gate of which were immigration authorities, checking passes and performing pat-down searches. Kyle and Yoshi easily slid past these authorities, and into the monorail train.

The planet on which Nuevo Cartagena sat was, it turned out, Earth-like, and not a planet at all, but a moon orbiting a yellow gas giant. The sun was an orange K-type star, and this part of the planet was very flat.

The monorail took Kyle and Yoshi from the spaceport to near the center of Nuevo Cartagena. Along the way, they were able to get a fairly good overview of their surroundings. The colony was quite large and spread out, rather than up, which was possible because of the extreme flatness of the terrain. The colony had an odd mix of Spanish colonial and futuristic architecture, made even more odd by the fact that this mix somehow worked very well. Everywhere were yellow posters with a black sketch of Roberto Fernandes' head, and the words; "¡Amamos al Tío Bobby! ¡Viva Fernandes!" in bold script.

"They sure like their leader," Kyle observed.

Kyle also took note of the ethnic stock of the colony, and the general condition. The ethnic stock was typical of Colombia, from which the colony had gotten its name, that is to say, the majority were of mixed European and indigenous South American blood, with a visible pure European minority. The conditions were obviously working class, however, everything was spotless, in spite of the buildings clearly being very old and decaying. It looked like a place and people aching for a revival of some kind.

On the way to the station, Kyle and Yoshi noted that a number of the streets were being prepared for an event, with the sidewalks being set up with rails to separate them from the street proper, and several streets being blockaded altogether by stacks of concrete blocks. They were, as promised, preparing for Roberto Fernandes' public appearance.

"Would it have killed The Old Man to send us a day or two ahead?" Yoshi muttered, and Kyle agreed.

The monorail reached its station, which was apparently near the center of Nuevo Cartagena. Kyle and Yoshi alighted onto the platform, which descended directly onto the cobblestone street. A stand stood to the side of the platform, distributing free maps and various tourist pamphlets of the colony for those arriving from the spaceport. Yoshi picked one such map up and began studying it.

“What do we do now?” Yoshi asked.

“What one always does,” Kyle said with a shrug. “Find when and where and on what route the march happens, walk the route, identify weak points, intercept the assassination.”

“Is that really the most effective strategy?” Yoshi asked, sounding rather doubtful of their success.

“It’s all I’ve got,” Kyle said. “Wish we could’ve brought Harune.”

“Well,” Yoshi said, “let’s ask the locals. I did bring something that should help.”

From inside his jacket, Yoshi pulled an identical pair of little scopes or spyglasses, and handed one to Kyle. Kyle held it to his eye and looked through, seeing that it was a thermal scope.

“Daishono, according to what I found out, has developed suits which enable total optic camouflage,” Yoshi explained. “This bypasses that shit.”

“Thank you for telling me at the last minute,” Kyle said dryly.

“Better late than never,” Yoshi said with mock optimism.

Kyle and Yoshi set out into the colony, soon after asking a police officer setting up barricades which route the march was to take. They reasoned that he ought to know such things, and as it turned out, he did.

According to the cop, the event was already beginning as they spoke. Fernandes was leaving his estate (called the “Palacio” by the locals) in an armored vehicle, towards the “Plaza de Armas,”

the main “town center” in Nuevo Cartagena, where he would leave his vehicle and march. He was expected to arrive there in about 30 minutes from when Kyle and Yoshi asked.

“We need to move, now,” Kyle said to Yoshi and pulled him away. He didn’t need to say more.

Yoshi pulled out the map, and in a near panic, the men found a route on foot to the Plaza de Armas. The monorail was to the spaceport only, and the streets were log jammed with vehicles to the point of being unusable. The only way was on foot, and so Kyle and Yoshi sprinted to the plaza. It was obvious that Yoshi had enhancements, with how well and how far he ran. Most alarming was that “Tío Bobby” was far ahead of schedule, as the men saw and passed his car long before they should have.

The men reached the Plaza de Armas, finding that it was as one might expect; a long, very wide square, bordered by grand traditional buildings. The sides were lined with crowds, holding propagandistic posters in support of their leader, as well as rifles raised above their heads.

“Fernandes products,” Yoshi said.

Kyle and Yoshi hurriedly pulled out their thermal scopes, scanning the Plaza de Armas for anyone invisible to the naked eye, and they found them. Too late, as it turned out.

They saw that on the sides of the buildings, clinging to them as though they were geckos, were numerous Daishono assassins, dressed in skin-tight suits and carrying what looked to be katanas with crystal blades. And just as the men were spotting them, Roberto Fernandes’ armored vehicle arrived, and his security began to alight, as did Roberto himself. The Daishono assets began turning off their camouflage and poising to jump to the square. As always, Kyle felt a split second of panic, and then instantly, strategy set in.

“The security can hold them off a minute, I hope. We need a car. Now!” Kyle ordered, and Yoshi nodded.

Even as they spoke, the Daishono assets began leaping from the buildings, launching themselves clean over the crowds, onto the plaza where Fernandes marched. Kyle pulled his gun and fired over the heads of the crowd, hitting the Daishono assets. He didn’t miss; Kyle never missed, except on purpose. But it was hard to tell whether the gun had much, or indeed any, effect.

At this point, there was utter pandemonium in the square. Fernandes’ security staff immediately surrounded him, with what Kyle was relieved to see were plasma force field body shields, which he was fairly sure would be effective for a few moments. The crowd, eager to protect their leader, began firing at the Daishono assets, using the rifles they’d brought for the march. A few of the assassins reached the armored vehicle and very easily flipped it, making Kyle’s call for a car quite wise.

Kyle, in his most urgent, militant telepathic “voice,” gave Tío Bobby one single word command; “Run.”

All of this, of course, took place in far less time than it takes to read, no more than several seconds, at which point Kyle and Yoshi turned and shoved their way back to the street, through the narrow archway to the square which they’d entered through. They set their eyes on the first car they saw, a green sedan occupied by an older gentleman.

“I’m driving,” Yoshi said, rounding the car in an instant and banging on the driver’s window.

“We need the car!” Yoshi shouted

“What’s going on?” the driver demanded, and instantly, Yoshi drew his gun.

“I don’t want to hurt you, now get out of the fucking car!” Yoshi screamed. The driver instantly obeyed.

Yoshi leapt into the driver’s seat, and Kyle into the front seat.

“Circle around. Alleyway on the right. Move!” Kyle barked, projecting the image of the map into Yoshi’s head.

Yoshi swung the car to the right, jumping the car onto the sidewalk which surrounded the Plaza de Armas, the backs of the buildings facing onto the streets. Yoshi slammed on the accelerator, and the car shot forward, rocketing along the sidewalk, which was somehow clear. Yoshi whipped around the square, turning at last into an alleyway between two buildings.

Kyle once again sent a message to Roberto Fernandes telepathically; “Show me your location.”

He was a military man, Kyle reasoned. He must know procedures of this sort. Kyle was correct, as Fernandes showed Kyle an image of where he was, crouched between two statues on the edge of the square, hiding behind one of the body shields he must have gotten from one of his bodyguards. He looked relatively safe from the fighting for the moment.

“Kyle! Where am I going?” Yoshi interrupted.

They’d turned onto an alleyway, and the end of it, still a good distance ahead, was blocked by the crowd. Yoshi kept his foot on the gas, looking rather nervous.

“Forward!” Kyle barked.

With all his psionic might, Kyle sent out a telekinetic “pulse” going both right and left, parting the crowd. Kyle hoped that none were crushed, but if they were, he had a feeling they’d be compensated for the cost of regeneration. Kyle sent another telekinetic “pulse” which blew away the portion of barricade they’d have collided with otherwise.

“Holy shit,” Yoshi muttered. “Where next?”

“Head for the building on the far end!” Kyle ordered.

Yoshi sped through the cleared opening into the Plaza de Armas. The square itself was still in utter chaos, with random rifles firing from the crowd, and the Daishono assets shredding

their way through any and all who attempted to stop them, though they put up a valiant effort.

Kyle and Yoshi rocketed through the plaza, Yoshi somehow managing to avoid hitting any innocents. They came to a grinding halt in front of the large, white, colonial style building at the end, which according to the signage above the massive doors, was the colonial library. All along the front were statues of various gods and goddesses of wisdom and intellect. Between two of these statues was one of the plasma force field body shields, and behind it was Roberto Fernandes. Yoshi slammed on the brakes in front of this body shield, so that Kyle's side of the car faced Fernandes.

Kyle flung open the car door and shouted an order he was utterly oblivious to the irony or humor of; "¡Ven conmigo si quieres vivir!"

Unintentionally humorous though it was (as evidenced by Yoshi's impish grin which Kyle had no time to question), Tío Bobby didn't need to be told twice. Flinging aside the shield, he leapt to his feet and opened the back door of the car and slammed it behind him.

"Move!" Kyle ordered, and Yoshi once again stood on the accelerator, taking the car into another alleyway and away from the Plaza de Armas, onto a street which had apparently been emptied, or was pedestrian only.

"We need to change cars," Kyle said. "Those Daishono assets will have logged this one when we drove past them, and they'll figure out it has us on board soon enough."

"How do you know they'd have logged us?" Yoshi asked.

"Because it's what I would do," Kyle said.

"Yoshi, who the fuck is your friend here? And what the fuck is happening?" Fernandes demanded from the back seat, speaking up for the first time.

Kyle turned, extending his hand in mock cordiality.

Kyle: "Kyle Dellschau. Emmermann sent me to save your ass."

Fernandes: "Well thank you. Many women would have been quite sad had you not."

Yoshi: "Now we're all best friends, where am I going?"

Kyle: "Pull into that alley there. Let's think."

Yoshi followed the directive, and Kyle leaned his head back, his eyes closed, thinking of strategy. It was Fernandes who interrupted Kyle's thoughts.

"What about my men?" Fernandes demanded.

"I'm sure you know what a regeneration tank is," Kyle said. "Those Daishono fucks will leave once they figure out we're gone, and so must we. Out of the car. Fernandes, you armed?"

"I'm always armed, I'm Roberto Fucking Fernandes," he replied, then pulled aside his green jacket to reveal not one but two pistols, one under his left shoulder and one on his left hip, then pulled his jacket aside on the other side to show off that he had quite a few extra clips.

"He's going to be recognized everywhere he goes," Yoshi pointed out.

"You're right," Kyle said, and began hurriedly searching the car, in hopes of finding an article of clothing, at last finding a dirty bandana. This, he handed back to Fernandes.

"Tie this around your face and try not to be yourself. Now, we move. No more delays," Kyle said, and so they moved.

The three men walked down the alleyway, ensuring that Fernandes was always in the middle and therefore shielded, with Kyle and Yoshi occasionally looking out through their thermal scopes. They rapidly crossed streets, going as quickly as they could into lesser traveled areas.

"I hope you know where you're going, because I sure don't," Yoshi said.

"I'm going nowhere, that's the point," Kyle said. "And I'm also looking for a car to steal, away from any cameras."

"And then where?" Fernandes asked, almost whining.

"First a tech shop, then out of the colony," Kyle said. "Lay low in the countryside a day or so, make our way back to the spaceport at night, get the fuck off this rock."

"That won't work," Yoshi said. "If they saw my face, they'll know who I am. Probably you too, Kyle. They'll head right for the ship and stake it out. What we do is make contact with The Old Man and have him send a pickup."

"Fine," Kyle said with a shrug, "but first, we need a car."

Just a few minutes later, the men came to a major street which they had to cross, and as always, Kyle and Yoshi took a look through their thermal scopes. Before, they'd seen nothing untoward. Now, they spotted two Daishono assets, perched on the roofs across the street.

"Kyle, do you—" Yoshi began.

"I see it," Kyle said, and at that moment the two Daishono assets (one male looking, the other female looking) turned their heads and scanned the side of the street where the men stood. The assets stood, shedding their camouflage and poising for a jump.

"We've been made! Fernandes, stand back!" Kyle shouted, as he and Yoshi drew their pistols, and Fernandes followed suit.

The street was fairly wide, and so the assets likely couldn't have made the jump the full distance, but Kyle, Yoshi, and Fernandes hardly gave them the opportunity, as the hail of gunfire knocked them down mid jump, causing them to crash down onto the street, four lanes across a six lane street, having jumped from at least 20 feet off the ground. The female crashed very violently on top of a car, the male onto the street itself, but neither seemed terribly bothered. A few people who'd been

walking on the street ran screaming, and cars began to drive away in panic from the shooting. The two Daishono assets regained their footing very quickly, and began to charge.

Yoshi: “Blades! Now!”

Kyle: “Fernandes, lay down! Don’t move!”

Kyle and Yoshi drew the longest blades they’d brought. These were special weapons of Arasaka make, and looked simply like handles of swords. However, a button press would extend a long blade, the edge of which would light up, showing it had a plasma edge, which was a single atom thick. It was quite literally impossibly sharp, at least if it had been made of pure metal.

The female Daishono asset had reached farther when jumping, and thus reached Kyle before he could extend the blade. She sprang, swinging a punch, but Kyle dodged, so that her fist went into the brick building behind him. Kyle grabbed her face and stepped into the grab, so that it turned to a throw so hard that it made a crater in the concrete where she landed. This allowed Kyle to extend the blade of his katana, but the asset wasn’t taking it lying down.

The asset shot to her feet, drawing her own crystal katana from her back, deftly blocking Kyle’s swing and pinning his katana to the ground, but Kyle thought fast, sidestepping and kicking the asset in the chest, causing her to step back, so that Kyle was able to thrust his katana, and run the asset straight through the chest, then twist the sword and pull it out sideways. The asset fell, and Kyle saw that her insides were all metal, wires, and bits of crystal.

“Holy shit, they’re... synthetic,” Kyle thought, perhaps aloud. He wasn’t used to killing his own kind.

Kyle looked up to see Yoshi standing over the body of the male synthetic. Yoshi was clutching his left arm, and Kyle ran up to him.

“He cut me,” Yoshi said sheepishly.

“You need medical attention,” Kyle replied. The cut was visibly very deep, almost to the bone, and blood was pouring onto the sidewalk.

“I’m fine, I think,” Yoshi said, clearly not mentally recovered from the adrenaline high he’d just had.

“The fuck you’re fine,” Fernandes said, having apparently crawled out from under the parked car he’d hidden under. “There’s an apothecary up the road, I see the red cross sign.”

Kyle looked up the street, and saw that the sign was indeed protruding from one of the buildings. As he looked, they all heard the unmistakable sound of police sirens approaching from somewhere. Fortunately, the sidewalks seemed to have emptied, so no one could immediately hear the men discussing their plans.

“Right,” Kyle said, “you two geniuses get in that alleyway. Yoshi, try not to bleed to death.”

“And you, Pendejo? Where are you going?” Fernandes demanded.

“I’m going to go get some first aid supplies,” Kyle said. “Now hide.”

The men ducked into the alley and Kyle turned to leave.

“Bring me back something to eat, would you?” Fernandes called out.

“Yeah, how about my dick?” Kyle called back, and set off up the street.

Kyle walked like a normal citizen, in spite of somewhat standing out. He walked with swagger, his hands in his pockets, as the local men did, and whistled loudly at a young lady he walked past, as he would have anyway. He hadn’t gone far before police cars began appearing. He kept his normal pace, hoping no one had told the police to look for a Nordic giant.

Apparently they hadn't, as the cars drove past him. It wasn't that he couldn't have easily taken down these cops. But he'd somehow rather not have. Kyle, as usual, had a soft spot for these salt of the earth folk.

He reached the pharmacy unmolested, finding it was a rather small, glass fronted shop, with all white shelves behind the counter.

"My friend is hurt," Kyle said to the pharmacist, a bald man with glasses and white coat. "I need styptic, gauze, iodine, suture kit, the works."

"Do you need an ambulance?" the pharmacist asked.

"No," Kyle said. "I'm a former medic, I know what I'm doing."

"If you say so," the pharmacist said, and gathered the supplies, which Kyle paid for.

"Anything else?" the pharmacist asked with a smile.

"Morphine," Kyle said. "If you have it."

"I do, but I need a prescription," the pharmacist said with a smile.

"I thought you might say that," Kyle said, "I don't suppose you would take a bribe? I'm not a bad guy, I promise."

"No," the pharmacist said, "in fact I'm—"

The pharmacist began to reach for the telephone on the wall.

"I didn't want to do this," Kyle said, drawing his pistol. Instantly, the pharmacist dropped the phone.

"I don't want to hurt you," Kyle said. "I promise there's a bigger picture here."

"Bullshit," the pharmacist said, but began gathering the morphine and several clean syringes with needles, which he laid on the counter.

"Thank you," Kyle said, "you might want to close your eyes for this next part."

No doubt imagining this was the end, the pharmacist closed his eyes. In casing the place, Kyle had spotted an extremely obvious surveillance camera above the counter, connected by a conspicuous wire to a rather poorly hidden computer on a little desk behind the shelves of medicine. This was what Kyle aimed at, firing five high velocity shots from his Fernandes P9-A "Motherfucker," which shredded the computer and, Kyle hoped, the recording of him in the pharmacy. Just in case, he put another bullet in the camera itself.

By this point, of course, the pharmacist had fainted dead away. Whenever he woke up, he'd find a wad of cash and a hastily scribbled note of thanks. Kyle also took a few candy bars, against his desire to spite Fernandes. Kyle was hurrying back up the sidewalk when one of the many police cars which were coming and going up and down the street pulled up next to Kyle. The driver's window was rolled down.

"Kyle, get in," a deep falsetto said.

Kyle turned to see that sitting in the driver's seat of the police car was, of course, Roberto Fernandes, now with a baseball cap and sunglasses. Without a word, Kyle opened one of the back-doors and entered the car, finding Yoshi also in the back, still clutching his gushing wound.

"This certainly won't attract attention," Kyle said sarcastically as he began laying out the first aid.

"Hey, what's your problem? I paid for it and I even-" Fernandes began.

"Just drive asshole," Kyle said. "Some part of town far from here."

"Sieg Heil!" Fernandes said, and began driving. Kyle began preparing and filling his syringe with morphine, which he injected into Yoshi's uninjured arm.

"Thanks Doc," Yoshi said with a weak smile.

“How’s he doing back there?” Fernandes asked as he drove.

“Not very good,” Kyle said frankly. “He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Not sure there’s even enough left for me to get it up,” Yoshi said weakly. Kyle and Fernandes laughed.

“Keep talking,” Kyle said, “and stay awake, that’s important. So, you know Roberto here pretty well, I take it?”

“We grew up together,” Yoshi explained.

For approximately the next two hours, Fernandes drove through Nuevo Cartagena, and he and Kyle kept Yoshi awake and conscious through conversation. Kyle disinfected, packed, and eventually stitched and bandaged Yoshi’s wound. He also convinced Yoshi to eat two of the candy bars he’d brought, at which point Yoshi seemed to regain most of his strength.

“Right,” Yoshi said at last. “We need to go to a tech shop.”

By this point, they were in an entirely new section of Nuevo Cartagena, this district being a good deal more affluent, with well-paved roads, interstellar brands, and upmarket hotels and restaurants. On the one hand, this meant essentially no police presence, but on the other, it implied there were more cameras than ever, with more technology about.

“Here we are,” Fernandes said, stopping in front of a tech store.

“No,” Kyle said. “You park three blocks away, and I’ll get it. Yoshi, you have your cash still?”

Wordlessly, Yoshi began emptying out his pockets, and Fernandes took off for Kyle’s requested distance, eventually pulling into yet another alleyway.

“What do you need?” Kyle asked.

“A glass pad,” Yoshi said. “Any model should do. Then I need an Arasaka PAC, net roaming activated.”

“Arasaka PAC?” Kyle asked.

“Pocket autonomous companion,” Yoshi explained. “They’ll know what you mean.”

“Am I the only one worried they’ll have your face on every screen as a probable conspirator in my kidnapping?” Fernandes demanded, sensibly for once.

“Well,” Kyle said, “when you got this car, you should’ve told the pigs not to look for anyone with my description. So it’s your fault if I have to kill any.”

Kyle got out of the police car and walked calmly from the alleyway onto the main streets, and along them towards the tech shop, which was on the ground floor of an intriguing all glass neo-colonial building, on the corner of two streets. The shop itself wasn’t so much a shop as an emporium, it turned out. They stocked a gadget for every need. One of the employees found Kyle the devices Yoshi needed, at very low prices, to Kyle’s shock, though it still drained most of the cash. Kyle was not spotted or recognized, and he reached the car again without being stopped.

“Alright,” Kyle said, entering the car, “will these do?”

“Very well indeed,” Yoshi said.

“Good,” Kyle said. “Fernandes, get us out of this fucking place.”

As they drove, Yoshi began fiddling with the two devices Kyle had brought, starting with the so-called “pocket autonomous companion”. The PAC, it turned out, was a little pocket-sized computer, with a little screen which could be slid upward to reveal a miniature keyboard. When the screen was slid up, the device turned on, and a voice began narrating.

“Hello. My name is Maiko. I’m your new personal assistant, designed by-“ the voice began.

“I’m a preexisting customer,” Yoshi interrupted. “Initialize voice recognition.”

A pause.

“Welcome back, Yoshi-San,” Maiko said.

“Message my father,” Yoshi said. “Tell him to call the glass pad with the following serial number.”

With that, Yoshi held up the glass pad and began reading the serial number aloud, which was, as always, in tiny print in the bottom right of the glass. He then ended with “send message.”

“He only communicates via pad,” Yoshi explained. “Now we wait for his call.”

“The man doesn’t trust his own technology, how classic,” Kyle chuckled.

The men drove onward, towards the edge of Nuevo Cartagena. It took some time, as the colony was enormous, but they eventually reached the edge.

“Plains, hills, or the beach?” Fernandes asked.

“Hills,” Kyle said after a moment’s consideration, “more places to hide.”

“Never did get that food,” Fernandes said a bit later.

“Well,” Kyle said, “I hope you don’t mind the taste of leaves until our pick up. Unless there’s something we can hunt.”

“There’s fish in the ocean,” Fernandes said, “and clams. And caves to hide in.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Turn the car around,” Kyle said.

Fernandes did, and not much later, the men were indeed on a cliff overlooking an azure ocean and beaches. The cliffs were granite, unlike the usual basalt sea cliffs and caves found on Earth. Kyle, Yoshi, and Fernandes found their way to a slope which they were able to walk down. Kyle destroyed the car by having Fernandes place it, still running, about a quarter mile from the edge of the cliffs, at which point Kyle placed a rock on the accelerator. When the car reached the cliff, it had gained such speed that it flew into the sea.

The men hid in a sea cave, and found a multitude of large, black clams on the edge of the shore. Shinji Arasaka Sr. did indeed call his son, although it wasn't until the next morning. He was able to connect them through to Emmermann, and within a matter of hours, one of Emmermann ships arrived at the top of the cliff, to convey all parties back to New Atlantis. This essentially concluded the mission, at least as far as Kyle was allowed to see, and thus he, Max, and Harune were returned to Fort Worden the next day.

However, while Kyle never saw the exact terms which Emmermann and Fernandes negotiated, this mission was one of the ones Kyle participated in which had the most visible effect. The Fernandes P9-A "Motherfucker" was visible in Der Bund within weeks, and widespread within months. Supported by Emmermann's protection and Arasaka's manufacturing capabilities, Fernandes Arms rose overnight. Either Yoshi or Fernandes must have spread Kyle's nickname for the gun, because it also became the common name, to Kyle's delight.

What also happened in a few months was something altogether more shocking and, in many ways, delightful. Kyle, Max, and Harune were in Jack's apartment, on what must have been March 2nd, 1990, when the doorbell rang.

"Get that please?" Jack called from the kitchen. It must have been Andrew who unlocked the door.

"Uncle Georg!" Andrew shouted on opening the door, and so Jack came rushing from the kitchen.

Georg stepped in, smiling and looking everyone over.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner," Georg said, "but we all are leaving immediately, once I can find Yoshiro Tsurabaya and Ms. Saunders-Roth, and I suppose the Fosters."

"What's going on? Did something happen to The Old Man?" Someone asked, possibly Max.

“The opposite,” Georg said. “I never thought I’d get to say this; Merry early Christmas, the war is over!”

Author’s note. I hope the reader has enjoyed this high-octane respite as much as I’ve enjoyed writing it. Also, some of my Spanish speaking readers may have noticed that “Nuevo Cartagena” seems to be incorrect, and it should be the female gendered “Nueva Cartagena.” I can only chalk this up to being one of the dialectal splits which inevitably occurs when a group secedes from its planet of origin.

Chapter 12

Before continuing with what occurred next, I believe it's high time for a brief history lesson on the Mars War which Georg was speaking of.

In the introduction to the first Volume of this book, I made mention of the Axis military and their flight into space following their defeat in the war, as well as their treaties with various Earth nations allowing children from across the globe to be taken for service and colonization purposes. I've further described various colonies which they established off-world, including outlines of Martian living and warfare in various time periods.

What I'll now explicitly convey is why Mars was so volatile. This volatility was caused, in its entirety, by the off-world Axis Germans who, in the summer of 1945, began parking their ships on the surface of Mars and annexing the planet in its entirety, despite having only been allocated a few pockets of territory by the Draconian Empire. While the Empire made no moves to stop the Germans, they also made no moves to help, thereby leaving the Germans to fight the entire population of Mars on their own.

Initially, the Germans made many gains, in spite of a lack of knowledge of the Martian terrain or inhabitants. However, their victories became short-lived, as not only were they on unfamiliar territory, but their 1944 treaty with the Draconian Empire carried some very limiting stipulations, the most meaningful being that the off-world Axis could only use technology supplied to them by the Draconian Empire, or technology which

the Axis themselves discovered or captured. While their conquests across the galaxy yielded a great deal, and in a remarkably short time period, the ability to replicate and mass-produce was limited for many technologies, and so again, progress was slowed.

Progress became even slower starting in the 1950s, when enhanced American troops, under the U.S. Navy, arrived on Mars in order to hunt and kill the Germans, taking the Second World War into space. The Americans, unlike the Axis, had made treaties which gave them very few, if any, explicit restrictions on the technologies they could acquire or use, and as a result, they began to have a technological edge.

For about 30 long years, the war dragged on, with the Germans fighting both the native inhabitants of Mars, as well as the Americans, when a new weapon (likely under Emmermann and cronies' specific direction) was put forward; soulless corporatism. By this point, the Germans were actively losing territory on Mars, and considering abandoning it as a planet altogether, evacuating their colonists to their other locations within the galaxy, which by this point, numbered in the thousands, due to the practice of going back in time centuries to start colonies, allowing them to grow and expand.

Throughout the Axis Breakaway colonies, corporations had begun cropping up, and by the 1970s, some may have technically been centuries or millennia old, due to the above-mentioned time travel practices, and as a result, had gained immense wealth and political and military power. The Draconian Empire treated these corporations as essentially separate nations, and so once again, these corporations were not subjected to restrictive treaties, and as such, made tremendous technological gains.

In the 1970s, the Axis found a loophole; while the treaty with the Draconian Empire had mostly forbade treaties with aliens outside the empire's borders, and entirely forbade treaties with aliens which would net technology for the Axis, it had made no such stipulation as regards other off-world humans, especially when those humans came from Axis colonies.

Within both colonial society and military, there was an intense hatred for most of these corporations, with a few exceptions, such as Kruger Mercenaries and Arasaka Robotics. Nonetheless, some Axis leadership saw their opportunity and took it, beginning to hire these corporations for their services in exchange for technology.

While this certainly turned the tide of the Mars War in the Axis' favor, it also massively escalated the war. Fighting intensified greatly between the Axis and Americans, and the Axis war on the indigenous became less of a war and more of a wholesale slaughter throughout the 1970s and 1980s, which led to not only countless deaths, but also an ever increasing sense of dissatisfaction and distrust within colonial society.

What exactly ended the war in 1990 we are unlikely to ever know, and it was, in all likelihood, a combination of factors. A huge anti-war movement in the colonies. The political fallout experienced throughout the quadrant. The realization by the Axis that the planet they so coveted would be uninhabitable if they continued. The notoriously harsh sandstorm season of 1989 to 1990. All these and many, many other factors likely contributed to the war's end. Now, we'll continue with how Kyle witnessed it.

Author's note. I don't have much to add at the end of this purely informational chapter. Those who still have questions are welcome to contact me and ask them.

Chapter 13

For several seconds, there was utter stunned silence in Jack's apartment, then thunderous cheering.

Andrew: "Holy shit! Something new to talk about at dinner!"

Jack: "I can go home without being shot at!"

Max: "This can't be real!"

Georg: "It's very real. They're signing the treaties in 36 hours, I think. We need to go, the ship is waiting!"

Kyle: "Shouldn't we pack? Or at least get money?"

Georg: "Don't worry about that, we're being put up in this fancy hotel in Neu Berlin, there'll be clothes there."

"I'll take him to get the others on the bike," Jack said, "the rest of you head for the ship."

"I'll do that," Kyle said, "I drive faster."

"Don't wreck my bike, she's all I've got!" Jack called out, already heading towards the ship with the boys.

Jack had parked his hoverbike outside his apartment, as always. Kyle took the key from its hook by the apartment door, approached the hoverbike alongside Georg, mounted it, and the two set off.

The closest location, as it happened, was the Roth's bunker. Kyle and Georg rocketed through the base, occasionally shouting "The war is over!" to random people they passed. They reached the Roth bunker in record time.

Kyle jumped from the hoverbike and began banging on the fireproof door. It was Jason who opened.

"Oh, Kyle. You need something?" Jason asked, looking rather exhausted.

“Your mother,” Kyle said with a smile, “urgently.”

Sondra was fetched, by which point Georg had dug something from his bag; a small black 16 mm movie camera. This, he held out to Sondra.

“You’re the lady who took all those magnificent pictures?” Georg asked.

“That depends on who’s asking,” Sondra said flippantly.

“She is,” Kyle cut in.

“You’re needed,” Georg said, handing her the movie camera. “You’ll be paid very well for documenting. But you need to come with us to Mars now.”

“Do I have a fucking choice?” Sondra demanded.

“Not really,” Georg said. “You’ll find appropriate clothing on board the ship. Can you get there quickly?”

“Why not? I was bored anyway. Jason, looks like we’re going to Mars,” Sondra sighed.

Jason did a little jump of excitement, though whether it was genuine, Kyle couldn’t tell.

Next, Kyle and Georg went to Tsurabaya’s and Foster’s homes. Both of them lived in proper houses, and they had their own cars. Tsurabaya brought a box of Cuban cigars for the hotel once the treaties were at last signed, and soon enough, they were all on the beach waiting to load onto one of the usual Emmermann shuttles. Jason wound up not making the trip.

“Prepare to get dressed up,” Georg warned, “it’s very early morning on Mars. We’re being taken to the hotel, then once we look the part, there’s a ceremonial breakfast and then a parade, and all the usual sort of bullshit.”

“Just how I like to spend my weekend,” McKayla Foster muttered sarcastically.

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” Tsurabaya said, “at least there’s free champagne.”

"I hope I'm drunk before the end of the first breakfast," Sondra teased.

"No doubt," Kyle said.

"No drinking for the documentarian," Georg said firmly.

The ship "jumped" as usual, winding up at the Neu Berlin spaceport, towards the outer edge. Kyle and the others alighted. Several hovering cars with fully tinted windows awaited them, and they all immediately loaded on.

"Where are we headed?" Someone in the car Kyle got into asked of the chauffeur, a red haired lad who looked barely old enough to drive a car.

"To the Paläste," he said, in what was apparently supposed to be sufficient explanation.

"Very fancy hotel," Kyle explained. "I've never had the money to so much as walk through the district."

"You are not one of Herr Emmermann's sons?" the chauffeur asked.

"I'm just the guy with the gun," Kyle said with a smile.

The cars drove a ways around the rim of the spaceport, then downward into the opening of a car tunnel descending up. The spaceport was above ground, beneath a monster dome, and a glance upward showed the first glimpses of a magnificent Martian sunrise.

The car tunnel wound a good distance underground, then went mostly on a straightaway path. The tunnel was very wide, with a number of lanes, and various other tunnels branching off. This was for use by the ultra wealthy few of Neu Berlin who owned cars, as cars were banned at street level, save for ambulances and police. Kyle felt a surge of contempt for those who would bypass the city's beautiful architecture just so they could have the entitlement of traveling by car.

The car emerged in an alleyway, at the back side of the grand, white, art deco styled building that was the Paläste. A wide metal loading door was open at the back, as there were at all the grand hotels which lined the roads on each side of the alleyway. In the loading door of the Paläste stood a team of men and women in tailored suits. Kyle and the others exited their cars, and the smartly dressed ladies and gents approached, with a tiny woman who looked about 50 leading them, wielding a clipboard in the same way one might wield a gun.

“We’re here to make you look like you belong on camera and provide you with the needs of your jobs,” the woman said briskly, “I’m Helga, but you may address me as God. I’m going to call your names, and each of you, as you’re found, will have a stylist come and take you to your room. Am I understood?”

“Yes Sir God!” the group echoed mockingly, and so it went.

Helga called out names in alphabetical order, and when their name was called, each one stepped forward, then one of the so-called stylists came forward to greet them and lead them away. Being highest on the alphabet, Kyle’s sons and then Kyle himself happened to be first.

“I’m Josef,” said Kyle’s stylist, holding out his hand, Josef being a fairly short gent with brown curly hair and glasses.

“I’m Kyle, and I hope that you’re trying to look that Jewish, otherwise I’m not sure how this relationship is going to work,” Kyle said with a chuckle. Josef laughed, and guided Kyle through the concrete loading bay to a large service elevator.

“Sorry about the entrance,” Josef said, “the front is all cameras and press.”

The elevator went up a number of levels, emerging into a laundry room, which Josef opened with a keycard, taking another out of his pocket and handing it to Kyle as an afterthought.

“Your room key,” he said. Kyle looked at it, seeing it was for room 1114.

At last, they were in the hallway of suites which they’d be staying in. The hallway was all white painted oak panels, with a dark floor which had a red patterned carpet running down its center. Josef apparently had a master keycard, as he also opened Kyle’s room. It was a two-room suite, with a minibar, several couches, a television, and king sized bed. Kyle didn’t have an opportunity to explore or enjoy it at the time, however.

“Right, then,” Josef said, ushering Kyle towards the dressing table, which stood in the main room. “Your hair and complexion look fine, but the beard has to go. Have a seat.”

Kyle had no choice, clearly, and so sat at the dressing chair. Josef opened a drawer and took out both a straight razor and a bottle of some kind of oil. He then very rapidly rubbed down first his own hands, then Kyle’s face.

“Where I come from, we have a drink first,” Kyle muttered. Josef rolled his eyes.

“If you value your face, you’ll be quiet, Dellschau,” Josef said, and then very rapidly shaved Kyle’s face, wiping off the oil with a cloth produced from somewhere. The process took no more than two minutes.

“Now,” Josef added, “on to getting you dressed.”

Josef threw open one of the room’s wardrobes, revealing inside it a Nacht Waffen dress uniform of the lowest enlisted rank, with tall black boots, gray pants, and a black jacket. Unlike the Nazi uniforms of World War II, this one, in true Nacht Waffen fashion, had pants worn over the boots. There were no insignia of any rank on the sleeves, just the usual Reichsadler patch on the left breast. Kyle didn’t need help putting it on properly, but Josef had to watch for protocol reasons. Kyle was

approaching his door when it swung open and Georg walked in, carrying under his arm a flat wooden box.

"I have a present for you," Georg said, setting the box down on an end table, showing that the top side had a Reichsadler etched into the top.

"Is that what I think it is?" Kyle asked, unsure whether to smile or cry.

"Yes it is!" Georg exclaimed, opening the box to show that it was lined with purple velvet, and couched in the center was a military medal.

The medal itself was the rather curious and syncretic Cross of Thor. It looked at first glance like the standard Iron Cross, the edge framed with tiny diamond studs. In the center of the cross was a silver Mjolnir, and in the center of the Mjolnir was a tiny obsidian swastika. Georg lifted it up reverently.

Georg: "I, Georg Nimmer, on behalf of The Federation of Free Germanic Worlds, bestow upon you, Kyle Dellschau, the highest honor I may bestow, the Maltese Cross of the Mighty Thor, for your acts courageous and uncommon in service of Nation, Race, and planet. Do you accept this honor?"

Kyle: "I do."

With that, Georg pinned the badge on the left breast of Kyle's uniform. Kyle wiped the tears from his eyes and looked up resolutely, smiling.

"Right then," Kyle said, "I believe we're in something of a hurry."

Georg and Kyle walked out into the hallway, finding that most of the others were waiting for them.

"I look like a fucking idiot," Max said, but Kyle beamed with pride at the sight of his two sons in full dress uniform.

"You look like a man," Kyle said, patting Max on the cheek slightly. Max swatted Kyle's hand away, but he smiled.

The last to come out was Sondra, who being a VIP guest rather than a military one, was dressed as a guest, in a stark evening gown of red silk, her hair pulled up into a smooth French twist.

“Ooh-la-la,” Andrew said, earning him a smack upside the head from Tsurabaya, who stood next to him.

“Thank you, Andrew. It’s been a while since anyone has said that about me,” Sondra said, nearly doubled over with laughter as her attendant handed her both the video camera and a Leica still camera. The attendant carried a black leather case of what must have been lenses, film, flashes, and such.

Out of nowhere, Helga reappeared, in her usual overbearing fashion.

“You will all follow me,” she said, and as they did, she began to narrate.

“You are all meeting Herr Admiral Emmermann, as I’m sure you know, and he will be accompanied by several persons, including the honorable Admiral Hayao Takahashi, and whomever else he has chosen to accompany him. You will address these men as Admiral and nothing else during this event. While you are on camera, you will keep your hands visible at all times, no exceptions, and you will follow the processions and seating arrangements you are given, no exceptions. You will eat the food and drink the drinks given to you, no exceptions. If at any point you are in need of something, suppress that need. Now, we have arrived,” Helga said at last, as the group had reached the elevator.

Kyle and the others boarded the waiting elevator, which bore them down to the second floor of the Paläste, opening onto a hall where a single long bar ran along one side, with enough bottles to have all of the population of Mars feeling a bit tipsy. The outward facing side of the bar was tiled with art deco

murals, and the entire place had the feeling of a giant speakeasy.

The bar was lined with all manner of German, Japanese, American, and assorted nationalities of soldiers, and civilians in only the most expensive clothing. At the end stood Emmermann and cronies.

“Mein Gott,” Jack muttered. “Of course he’s brought fuckin’ Schatzelein.”

“Who is Schatzelein?” Tsurabaya asked.

“The giant German Shepherd at his side, on the leash that costs more than my annual income,” Jack explained, and indeed, Emmermann did have a large German Shepherd at his side.

“She hates me,” Jack said.

“Well we all hate you, Asshole, but the rest of us manage to get along,” Anya Mittelbraun said playfully. Jack seemed to relax a bit at this.

Sondra, for her part, began to snap pictures, until Kyle grabbed her by the arm and started pulling her up with the group.

Sondra: “What are you doing?”

Kyle: “You want to look like a hack with a camera, or you want to look like the professional he actually hired?”

Along the way, the group passed Shinji Arasaka Sr, along with Sakura, the former in full Imperial Navy regalia, the latter in civilian clothing. Both happened to turn and look, seeing Kyle’s group as they passed, and Harune stepped to the edge of the group, very conspicuously “scratching the corner of his eye” with his middle finger only.

One last notable thing occurred before they reached Emmermann and his five cronies he drank with, which is that Kyle recognized one of them, a tall muscular bald man, as the man who’d led the unit that had destroyed his beloved guitar (and all

other musical equipment) when he was in Budapest. Kyle and Sondra exchanged knowing glances. She recognized him as well.

They reached Emmermann's group at last, and hasty introductions were made all around, and as usual, Kyle and sons were never introduced to those Emmermann associated with. Kyle was growing ever more tired of being kept in the dark about these things. This time, at least, he and the boys had Sondra as company in their unfamiliarity.

The tall, heavily medalled woman with orangey blonde hair, in full SS regalia, was Viktoria Romanov, Emmermann's eldest daughter. Kyle had at least seen her, during Emmermann's grand party on Valhalla in 1985, when Emmermann had explained that she would inherit his assets, and then Max after her. In spite of her Russian name, her accent was pure northeast German.

The bald man whom Kyle and Sondra recognized wore the medium blue dress uniform of a high-ranking enlisted soldier within Nacht Waffen. In addition to the color difference with Kyle's much lower ranked enlisted uniform, this one had the more traditional tucking of the pants into the boots. The man was introduced as Jonas Flessig, and he showed no recognition at all for Kyle or Sondra. Somewhat confusingly based on uniform, while this man was still of enlisted rank within Nacht Waffen, he was also captain of a starship within Nacht Waffen's American auxiliary, the ship being the U.S.S.S. Washington, as even one enlisted within Nacht Waffen outranks any American auxiliary.

The American woman, a short, dark haired beauty in a black uniform resembling but not quite identical to those of the U.S. Navy, was Lieutenant Commander Tamara Lacroix, also hailing from the U.S.S.S. Washington. She spoke with a thick, yet sensual Southern drawl, and had a kind of beauty and charisma

such that every man wanted her and every woman wanted to become her. Kyle saw from the glances between her and Georg that in their cases, the relationship wasn't strictly professional.

The bespectacled dark-haired man with the black attaché case, again of high enlisted rank, was introduced as Heinrich Müller, Emmermann's top telepath, by Emmermann's own estimation. Kyle had heard of this man before, and knew that he and Georg were old friends. Heinrich Müller gave Kyle an odd sense of familiarity, but he shrugged it off at the time.

Last but not least among the associates Emmermann drank with was the Japanese admiral, Hayao Takahashi. This uniform was of the highest possible order within Yozora No Kunshu, being black with white piping, the jacket reaching about halfway to the knees, with a white sash around the middle, and a katana slung over the back, the hair being pulled back into a single short ponytail. It turned out that Takahashi was the top man as far as Sen No Taiyō No Teikoku's interests on Mars went, at least officially, though he was most likely merely a vassal of Arasaka Robotics.

Within one minute of Kyle's group arriving, the introductions had been already made, and Emmermann was giving orders as to placement.

"Right," Emmermann said, "I'm driving the head of the motorcade. Georg, Lacroix, I want you riding in front with me, the press will like that. Kyle, you're in back with Max and... McKayla Foster, why not. Viktoria, you drive the second car. Takahashi and Flessig, you're in front with her. Harune, Jack, Andrew, you're in back. Foster, you're driving the third, Anya and Tsurabaya in front with you. Have I missed anyone?"

"The Lügenpresse?" Romanov asked, gesturing at Sondra.

"What? Ah yes. Ms. Saunders, position yourself wherever you'll get the best shots, and you may start your recording at

any time,” Emmermann said briskly. “Now, let’s get this shit over with.”

The massive group set for the elevators, and most of the other assorted attendees lined up around the long bar also began standing and preparing for their exits to the so-called “peace parade.” What order Emmermann’s group entered the elevator in is largely a blur, however at one point, Kyle found himself next to Lacroix, trying desperately to hide his blatant ogling.

“Lookin’ is free. The rest will cost ya,” Lacroix said.

Kyle found himself overwhelmed and fairly embarrassed by the ocean of cameras that assaulted the group upon exiting the elevators into the Paläste’s lobby. Everyone kept their eyes forward as much as possible, just trying to reach the street and the parade. Soldiers, no matter their allegiance or rank, are never comfortable with attention, though Lacroix embraced it, smiling and waving enthusiastically at the press.

In the street in front of the Paläste were the parade cars. Black, old fashioned looking convertibles, which of course hovered, rather than drove on wheels. The tops were down, and in front of the motorcade was a hoverbike escort team. Sondra wound up riding on the back of one of these escorting motorcycles, allowing her a frontward view of the motorcade. The three cars Emmermann oversaw were far from the only ones present. There must have been at least 30 cars, carrying individuals of this faction and that, along with their bodyguards and other assorted hangers-on, as well as one or two low ranked types, to look good and inclusive while on camera.

Kyle sat in the backseat of the front car, as instructed by Emmermann, with Max in the center and McKayla Foster on the left. Emmermann drove, with Georg and Lacroix both to his right. And so the motorcade began.

The streets were lined all over with both the press and civilians, but especially the latter, who took up not only the streets, but also virtually every second story and up window, and every usable rooftop, where they stood saluting, waving flags, and taking pictures of the motorcade. Lacroix frequently stood to wave and salute and blow kisses. She was the only one, at least in Kyle's car.

Kyle, of course, felt heartened by this display of patriotism. However, being so close to the center of attention was quite humiliating, not to mention a bit worrisome, given his line of work.

The rest of the morning is largely a blur for Kyle. The breakfast, which took place at a biergarten in the district of Little Munich, went smoothly. By some fluke, Kyle was seated at the same table as Gabriel Kruger, head of Kruger Mercenaries, and for the first time saw a Kruger Mercenaries asset, a young man whose entire left arm and most of the left side of his face were metal and robotic, and visibly very painful and embarrassing to use.

After the breakfast came the main event; the signing of the treaty. The motorcade drove to the building which had been purpose-built for the event, which was a monstrous white modular building, round and with one single window wrapping around the center. The building was above ground, affording those inside panoramic views of the desert. Inside were row after row of white long tables, surrounding a single round table. The staff of the signatories sat at the long white tables, and the press stood in the back. About a quarter of the hemispheric building stood simply open to the outside, and the doorway was at least 30 feet high.

The signing took hours, as the treaty had to be presented to the representative of each polity, who would read the treaty out

loud in his or her native tongue, and if it was a Breakaway nation or a Terran nation signing, then all attendees from that polity would stand and sing a selected nationalist song. The song chosen for Der Bund, as it happened, was the following.

O Deutschland hoch in Ehren,
Du heiliges Land der Treu
Stets leuchte deines Ruhmes Glanz
In Ost und West aufs neu!
Du stehst wie deine Berge
Fest gen Feindes Macht und Trug
Und wie des Adlers FlugVom Nest
Geht deines Geistes Zug

Haltet aus! Haltet aus!
Lasset hoch die Banner wehn!
Zeiget ihm, zeigt dem Feind
Daß wir treu zusammen stehn
Daß sich unsre alte Kraft erprobt
Wenn der Schlachtruf uns entgegen tobt
Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Gedenket eurer Väter
Gedenkt der großen Zeit
Da Deutschlands gutes Ritterschwert
Gesiegt in jedem Streit
Das sind die alten Schwerter noch,
Das ist das deutsche Herz
Die schlägt ihr nimmermehr ins Joch,
Sie dauern fest wie Erz

Haltet aus! Haltet aus
Lasset hoch das Banner wehn
Zeiget stolz, zeigt der Welt
Daß wir treu zusammenstehn,
Daß sie alte deutsche Kraft erprobt
Ob uns Friede strahlt, ob Krieg umtobt
Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Zum Herrn erhebt die Hände
Er schirm es immerdar,
Das schöne Land, vor jedem Feind.
Hoch steige, deutscher Aar
Dem teuren Lande Schirm und Schutz
Sei, deutscher Arm, bereit
Wir bieten jedem Feinde Trutz
Und scheuen keinen Streit

Haltet aus! Haltet aus!
Lasset hoch das Banner wehn!
Lasset uns treu und kühn
Mit den ersten Völkern gehn!
Daß sich deutscher Geist und Kraft erprobt
Wenn das Ungewitter uns umtobt
Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Haltet aus im Sturmgebraus!

Kyle, being a part of Emmermann's private security, was seated at one of the front tables, and was therefore afforded an excellent view of the proceedings.

The center table was occupied by a representative of each of the three recognized indigenous species of Mars; a Martian Deinonychoid, a queen Antoid, and a Martian indigenous human priestess, with a copy of the treaty in front of them to be signed. The representatives of the various aggressor factions and companies, and their attachés, would descend down as they were called by way of the building's intercom.

Kyle, in his way, dissociated himself from boredom fairly soon after proceedings began. However, he did register that in addition to the Germans and Japanese (off-world, of course), all branches of the United States Armed Forces had to sign, as did a Taiwanese faction, a Russian faction, a French faction, a Czech faction, and innumerable corporations, as well as even some private families who'd merely donated money or weapons.

The rest of the treaty signings and the three-day event which followed are mostly a blur to Kyle's memory, and therefore mine through him. It was a whirlwind of dinners and breakfasts and parades and parties, with little rest.

At one of these parties, Kyle had retreated to a corner bar, in hopes of escaping the cameras. He ordered his usual Corelian Sour, and stood to wait for it.

"It's all bullshit, you know?" a drunken Japanese voice at his elbow cut in, to no one in particular.

"In what way?" Kyle asked the soldier it had come from, whom he didn't know.

"We're still at war," the soldier replied, "it's just this one planet we're pretending to agree on for the moment."

Soon enough, the fanfare ended, and people began returning to the bases and colonies from which they'd come, Sondra with

a great deal of cash, and a list of contacts to reach out to in order to assist in the making of the propaganda short film she sought.

Sondra did make this film, using both her own footage and photographs and those compiled from her sources. It took several months, but in the intervening time, Sondra went around Fort Worden, asking for a song to use, having decided she was going to make a music video.

The song she chose was one of Max's. As it turned out, for reasons that Kyle and Max still don't understand, Sondra was unable to acquire the license to use Max's original recording, and as a result, she had to go the more conventional route; finding to which Terran record label the song had been sold, acquiring, then using that version of the song. The copyright was questionable, however, since the song was sold under a false label off-planet anyway, there wasn't much risk.

For the sake of historical preservation, I've included the print version of the original lyrics as Max wrote them, whilst audio-book listeners will hear the version which is known on Earth and was broadcast to practically every television screen in the Breakaway, via Sondra's propaganda music video.

I ask the reader to envision that video as they read these lyrics or listen to this song, imagining all the colonial celebrations which were contained in it.

I follow Koenig Straße
Down to Eichmann Park
Listening to the wind of change
A dusky desert night
Soldiers passing by
Listening to the wind of change

The world is closing in
Oh, did you ever think?
That we could be so close, like brothers?
The future's in the air
I feel it everywhere
A-blowing with the wind of change

Take me to the magic of the moment
On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow dream away
In the wind of change

Walking down the street
Distant memories are buried in the past
Forever
I follow Koenig Straße
Down to Eichmann Park
Listening to the wind of change

Take me to the magic of the moment
On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow dream away
In the wind of change

The wind of change blows straight
Into the face of time
Like a storm wind that will ring the freedom bell
For peace of mind
Let the Martian Erhu sing
What my guitar wants to say

Take me to the magic of the moment

On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow dream away
In the wind of change

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh

In the wind of change!

Sondra never received official credit for the film. However, Emmermann and those in his inner circle were well aware, and called her “The New Leni Riefenstahl.”

While the end of the Mars War was certainly a cause for celebration, it made Kyle and many others uneasy. For off-world Germans, it meant radical societal change. But that is a story for the near future.

***Author’s note. And so, a major chapter of Kyle’s life has ended, along with a major chapter in Breakaway history. I hope the reader is intrigued for what’s to come. ***

Chapter 14

For the first two years after the Mars War ended, not much seemed to change. The Saigon mission recounted five chapters previously occurred in this postwar period, and Kyle grew into his own as an instructor more and more, taking the time to get to truly know his boys, and what they liked.

Max, he learned, had a strong dislike of pork, even as he had a love of beef. Max also considered Wonder Woman his first crush, which was why he collected those comics more than any others, deeming it a guilty pleasure.

Harune, Kyle learned, had a love of aviation, beyond the fact that it had for a while been his job to learn it. Kyle also discovered that Harune's favorite dessert was a strawberry soufflé, as he'd once eaten in some swanky restaurant in Oslo.

"I also like Joshie," Harune said, while Kyle was asking him these questions.

"I would hope that you'd like your best friend," was Kyle's willfully ignorant reply.

One benefit to the end of the Mars War was that bootleg media became more accessible. Jimmy had kept in place Project Phoenix's long-standing ban on nearly all media from Earth, save for records containing songs already sold out of Project Phoenix, partly in order to uphold certain laws which prevented time paradoxes, and also to comply with colonial laws. However, there was a loophole; media bootlegged from Earth into the colonies, repackaged as colonial products and given false dates, and then bought by Project Phoenix assets while off-world were tolerated. And since Mars was so easily accessible via permanent

portal, and by and large safe to visit now, this repackaged media became considerably more common throughout Project Phoenix's bases.

As a result, Kyle at last began having some level of exposure to Terran pop culture, finding himself particularly drawn to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. Harune, for his part, introduced Kyle, Max, Andrew, and Joshie to anime. The family favorite was *Sangokushi*, until most everyone got tired of Harune playing it.

One very major event during this period was the end of the Cold War and the great thaw which followed. The main, most visible consequence of this, at least for the time being, was that transfers of personnel began occurring between Project Phoenix and Nacht Waffen and the various former Eastern Bloc nations. No one in Kyle's immediate circle was transferred, however, there were a great many children and soldiers gathered into Project Phoenix from these countries, particularly Ukraine, northeast China, Lithuania, and the region of the Volga in Russia settled historically by ethnic Germans.

While in some ways, this was welcome, as it meant some relief from staffing shortages and easier access to certain weapons and technologies, and Kyle had a strong fondness for the blonde Ukrainian ladies, it also contributed to an atmosphere of distrust and ethnic tension. The Cold War might have been over, but over 40 years of Slavophobia and Sinophobia were still very much present and common.

Little contact was had with the Emmermann empire during this period, though Georg kept up his frequent calls. Emmermann, apparently, was shifting his political focus and making use of his other assets and resources, and thus Kyle saw little action in this period in general.

As always, no period of calm in Kyle's life was destined to last, and one evening in summer 1992, Georg called Kyle and told

him to pack. Kyle and Jack only were being sent this time, Max, Harune, and Andrew weren't to come.

"What's this about Brother?" Kyle asked, thinking as he spoke about how many times he'd had to ask that question.

"I have no clue. But The Old Man sure is fucking excited about it," Georg said, slightly ominously.

Kyle packed, and the next morning, was ready as always, and Jack came to pick him up on his motorbike, taking them to the usual beach, where the usual shuttle arrived to gather them.

"I don't know if I like this," Jack said, in a rare moment of apparent skepticism towards his father.

The chosen estate, as it turned out, was Emmermann's home on Centurion, where Kyle had first met Emmermann after awakening from the vat. For a description of it, see the previous volume. As on Kyle's first visit, the ship touched down on a landing pad on a shelf jutting out from a mountain which overlooked the estate, a glass elevator descending to a path leading up to the Eastern European styled house. Georg awaited Kyle and Jack.

"Georg Nimmer. I'm the one who did the deed so your ass isn't on the scrap heap right now," Georg said with a grin.

"What?" Jack asked, looking back and forth between Kyle and Georg.

"Inside joke," Kyle said with a laugh, and the men boarded the elevator.

Kyle, Jack, and Georg reached the wide front doors of the house, finding Emmermann waiting for them. He did indeed look rather excited, or as close to it as he ever looked. Rapidly and eagerly, he gestured the men along to his study, the same one where Kyle had received his first assignment from Emmermann. It was almost nostalgic. Emmermann rounded his desk, no doubt preparing to give one of his grand presentations.

“Gentlemen,” Emmermann said, “Mars is a fucking mess. We were given almost no control in that Gods forsaken treaty, nor were our allies. We’ve been unable to conduct surveys on our own soil. It’s a disgrace! The war might be over, but now we’ve entered a war of information, and goddammit, we’re going to win this one!”

Internally, Kyle, Jack, and Georg were probably all rolling their eyes, but of course they kept silent. And anyway, he would calm down when he’d gotten his theatrics out of his system.

“And how would we do that?” asked one of the men.

“How does one win any intelligence war? By having more intelligence,” Emmermann said, “which brings my proposal to the fore.”

And so Emmermann began to tell of his grand Mars proposal. He was forming, in essence, a paramilitary intelligence group, which would serve only Emmermann and his interests, which he considered to be analogous to the interests of Der Bund, even if they couldn’t see it. This group would be centered on Mars, though they’d be called to other places at Emmermann’s discretion, and they’d be using Kyle’s ship, Prometheus, to get from point to point.

Most surprising, perhaps, was the degree of autonomy Emmermann was giving to the founders of this private military, who were to be Jack and Kyle. Emmermann was giving them two months to conduct a basic planetary survey of Mars, and find themselves a unit.

Kyle: “Prometheus needs a pilot.”

Emmermann: “You’re her captain. Can’t you fly her?”

Kyle: “In a straight line, for a short distance, with no threats. I cannot fly at distance, nor would I be able to handle her if things got harried.”

Emmermann: “Very well then, I’ll find you a pilot.”

Kyle: "No need. I know of one. Get me David Steinel."

Emmermann: "I don't know this Steinel. Kyle, I can provide you a list of the best pilots I know."

Kyle: "Well, I'm telling you the best pilot that I know. I want David Steinel."

Emmermann: "Are you refusing my offer?"

"It's my unit, isn't it?" Kyle asked, almost smugly, and miraculously, Emmermann conceded, saying Steinel would be sent, and Kyle was welcome to hire him. With that, the meeting was dismissed, and Kyle and Jack were to return to Fort Worden.

"You've got balls, I'll say that much," Jack muttered as they walked down the hall from the study, "I'm just never sure if they make you brave or stupid in your case, my friend."

"Why not both?" Kyle asked, grinning like a schoolboy.

Kyle and Jack returned then to Fort Worden, having never even unzipped the bags they'd brought. They rather wondered why Georg had told them to pack in the first place, if they weren't staying. Whatever the case, they returned to the ship, which conveyed them back to Fort Worden, having arrived less than two hours after they'd left.

"Right," Kyle said, once he and Jack were back on Terra Firma, "what do we do now?"

"Start making a unit," Jack said resolutely, "we start with our sons."

"Good a place as any," Kyle said, and he and Jack climbed onto the hoverbike and jetted back towards the base.

Kyle and Jack returned to their jobs for the day, and Kyle took the opportunity to study his students, searching for those who'd fit his purposes. There were two girls who truly stood out; Elena Kovac, for her psionics, and Iridia Cheng for her exceptional skills as a survivalist. Kyle decided to recruit them, but was determined to stick to adults afterwards, as Harune, Max,

Andrew, and Joshie McBride were already guaranteed recruitment, which Kyle and Jack had decided to arrange that night.

The boys, as it turned out, were all quite keen on the idea, as it meant a secure salary, except Joshie. He looked very suspicious. Eventually, with dinner finished, everyone began to entertain themselves and chat excitedly about the future, Kyle drifting alone onto the apartment's porch, when Jack approached.

Jack: "I hope we're doing the right thing."

Kyle: "So do I."

Jack: "You know what the natives are calling us now? 'The Black Terror.' We weren't their friends."

At one point, Andrew asked a rather important question.

Andrew: "So Dad, what's our theme song?"

Jack: "What theme song?"

Andrew: "You can't have a badass squad without a theme song!"

Max: "Anthem, dumbass."

"Shut up, you stupid bastard," Andrew said, then added; "how about I work on some material?"

In the coming couple of weeks, Andrew did pen what would come to be the theme song of Emmermann's private army. The song was the following.

Gotta raise a little hell

Young blood, run like a river

Young blood, never get chained

Young blood, heaven need a sinner

You can't raise hell with a saint

Young blood, came to start a riot

Don't care what your old man say

Young blood, heaven hate a sinner
But we gonna raise hell anyway

Raise hell
Yeah
Raise hell

Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Baby drop them bones
Baby sell that soul
Heaven fare thee well
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell

Young blood, stand and deliver
No need for a queen event
Young blood, gotta pull the trigger
When the whole world gone and scared
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell

Raise Hell
Baby drop them bones
Baby sell that soul
Heaven fare thee well
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell

Raise Hell
Baby drop them bones
Raise hell

Baby sell that soul
Raise hell
Heaven fare thee well
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell
Somebody gotta, gotta raise a little hell

“Your grandfather will fucking hate it,” Jack said, laughing.
“Let’s use it!”

In the coming weeks, Kyle and Jack made their recruitments. David Steinel was, through Emmermann’s seemingly limitless tentacle of influence, reassigned to Fort Worden, along with his brother, Franz, who Jack recruited as a sniper.

What was immediately lacking was an armorer and weapons technician, as well as a medic. For the former, Kyle approached Tsurabaya.

“I’ll help out when I can,” Tsurabaya said, “but I I have to run the armory. You want my recommendation? Go with Carina Buchner.”

“Who is she?” Kyle asked.

“One of our new arrivals, from the Volga,” Tsurabaya explained, “she’s the best at what you need.”

“Just what I need, a goddamn Ruskie,” Kyle said, but he didn’t have many other options he thought reliable, and anyone Tsurabaya would recommend, Kyle considered trustworthy.

Kyle’s position as an instructor gave him access to a roster of every person at Fort Worden. He used this to find Carina Buchner, who was at a desk in the infantries sector, in another of Fort Worden’s many office segments which spiraled into the Earth. Kyle went, and found that she was a striking blonde with blue eyes. Though her surname was Germanic, her features were quite Slavic, and her German, Russian accented, which made

Kyle decidedly uninterested in her as any potential conquest. However, she passed his quiz on weaponry, and so Kyle was able to recruit her.

For the medic, Jack made the recruitment, and it was Frida Hofnitz, who had accompanied Kyle on his first ever mission out of Project Phoenix.

“I know you don’t like her,” Jack said, “but she’s the only one I truly know.”

And thus the original unit was completed, and was composed of the following:

Jack Flynn, “Ares”: Unit Leader

Kyle Dellschau, “Daedalus”: Unit Leader

David Steinel, “Apollo”: Pilot

Carina Buchner, “Atalanta”: Weapons and Armor Repair

Franz Steinel, “Hades”: Sniper

Andrew Flynn, “Bellerophon”: Spotter

Frida Hofnitz, “Demeter”: Medic

Harune Arasaka, “Icarus”: Psionics

Elena Kovac, “Medea”: Psionics

Maximilian Bronsley, “Heracles”: General Infantry

Iridia Cheng, “Alectrona”: General Infantry

Kyle and Jack decided to name their group “The Medusas,” in keeping with the Greek mythological theme, and Medusa was the scariest figure they could think of.

In Kyle’s own words; “One look from us and you were fucked, just like Medusa.”

When this initial group had been put together, Kyle and Jack made contact with Emmermann via Georg, who invited them back, along with Max, for whatever reason, to lay it out in detail. Thus they returned to his Centurion estate, with short dossiers of each of the recruits they’d chosen. Max laid these out on Emmermann’s desk, and Emmermann looked up.

Emmermann: "Why so few?"

Jack: "Pardon, Sir?"

Emmermann: "When I said private army, I imagined it a bit bigger than this."

Max: "Well Sir, I'm sure there's many things you'd wish to be bigger, but there it is."

Jack instantly turned beet red, and Kyle hastily began attempting to give The Old Man a more satisfactory understanding, hoping that he hadn't understood Max's quip.

"Better be more careful with your mouth, Mi Pequeño," Kyle said, once they were headed back home, though he was feeling a bit too much fatherly pride to be truly upset.

Thus began the Medusa unit. Their lives, trials, and tribulations, are a series of stories for the following volumes. However, one last story remains to be told before this new era of Kyle's life can truly begin.

Author's note. Some readers who've made an effort to retain information across volumes, may notice some surface level similarities between The Medusas and Kyle's IBIS unit, The Golden Fleece. Rather than draw hasty conclusions that the author is recycling themes, perhaps the reader should entertain the idea that patterns are not unheard of in life.

Chapter 15

Before I can begin to tell the story of the Medusas, I must first tell the story of a loss they suffered, before they could truly get off the ground, literally and figuratively, in late August or early September of 1992. Max was not long 16, and very shortly, on September 12, Andrew Flynn would be reaching his 18th birthday.

It started as a fairly standard artifact retrieval mission, on a mostly unexplored jungle planet in the galactic rim, so unexplored, in fact, that it had no name; however, it corresponded to a planet on a recently discovered map of the region, which indicated the planet had once been the capital of a small empire, and so it reasonably promised to bear technology, or at least fragments of it.

Kyle didn't care for the uncertainty much, it wasn't altogether uncommon, and it generally had few repercussions, and so with his classic shrug, Kyle began gathering a small crew. It included two Medusas, Joshie and Andrew, and a few other recent graduates, as well as Fort Worden's only archaeologist, Dr. Janet Clarke.

As this was an archaeological scouting mission, the crew had more equipment than usual. This included small metal detectors which also detected electromagnetic fields, little sonar scanners with screens which were, in fact, ground penetrating radar devices, pocket cameras, as well as the usual weapons and wrist computers. Kyle and the others stepped through to the

planet. Once again, nothing seemed amiss. The sun was sweltering, the plants multicolored, and all the other things typical of a jungle planet.

"Alright," Kyle said, "we split up, you guys know the drill. You see anything, use the earpieces."

"Look out for anything and everything old and unusual," Dr. Clarke added, "and don't break anything."

Dr. Clarke was a sweet woman, from the mountains of northern Georgia. She was one of the few exceptions Kyle made to his hatred of "labcoats," as Dr. Clarke was not only sweet, but curious. Her interest in the field was genuine, and her position indicated she had no interest in pay.

Kyle and the others split off, their metal detectors and GPR devices turned on and at the ready, Kyle heading to the north.

"Hey, I think I'm getting something!" Andrew exclaimed after a while.

"Meaning?" Dr. Clarke asked.

"I'm getting an electromagnetic signature," Andrew said. "It's inert. Should I follow it?"

"Yes," Kyle said. "Let us know what you find."

Here and there, everyone was finding various bits of metal and an odd black stone.

"Hey," one of the crew's voices, belonging to a young lad with the callsign Shiva, said over the comms, "I'm standing over a cave, and I think I was in this spot earlier. There was no cave here earlier."

Kyle paused.

"You think, or you know, Shiva?" Kyle asked.

"I think I know, Daedalus," Shiva quipped, "no, I'm--"

"Holy shit!" Andrew's voice cut in.

"Really Bellerophon, there are ladies present," Kyle said, laughing. "What is it?"

“Sorry,” Andrew said sheepishly, then continued; “there’s a pyramid. About three meters high. Has a glowing blue orb on the top.”

“I’m headed over!” Dr. Clarke exclaimed.

“Alright,” Andrew said. “Hey, is anyone else feeling-“

Suddenly, Andrew was cut off. No one realized at the time, but these were the last words they or anyone else would ever hear Andrew speak.

“Feeling what?” Kyle asked.

Silence.

“Do you copy, Bellerophon?” Kyle asked.

“I’m tracking him,” Dr. Clarke said, “he seems to be running very fast.”

Now slightly alarmed, Kyle switched on his wrist computer, and saw that, indeed, Andrew was moving very fast. Inhumanly fast, and in an erratic and wild pattern, his tracker cutting in and out.

“He’s under the ground!” someone, possibly Joshie, exclaimed on the comms, just as Kyle realized the same thing.

“He’s being dragged!” Kyle cried. “Everyone, move towards his position. Converge and start shooting the ground. Move!”

What followed exactly is a blur. However, Kyle’s orders were followed, and from the ground emerged a monstrous bluish gray worm, looking the same as the ones Kyle had encountered in the Stargate Program, and when it emerged, Kyle knew all was lost. The worm was shredded by the soldier’s rifles. I will not, for Andrew’s dignity, describe what was found inside the worm’s stomach.

Kyle spent at least an hour crawling on the ground, screaming and wailing, searching desperately until he found Andrew’s dog tags, forbidding anyone else from leaving or from helping him to look. He couldn’t have faced Jack or Max without them, nor

could he allow the news to reach them from any other source. When he at last found the tags, he washed them in a stream which ran through the jungle, and swore everyone on the op to silence until there was a public announcement made.

I will not describe how Kyle informed Jack that Andrew, his adored only son, had been killed from one minute to the next. Nor will I describe Kyle telling the same news to Max about his dearest friend. Some moments are too personal to ever put to paper, and the same applies, in general, to how the family mourned in the few days which Jimmy allowed them before they had to return to work.

Eventually, the subject of funeral arrangements inevitably came up. For once, Emmermann didn't interfere, and allowed those who were actually involved in Andrew's life to make the arrangements.

While Andrew was to have his official headstone placed in the plot Jack had bought on Mars, his funeral was to be held at Camp Hero.

"It was his home, shitty as it was," Jack said. No one felt a need to object, and Jimmy granted permission without question.

Andrew's funeral had a beautiful view, facing into Camp Hero's permanent sunset, on a beach not far from the foot of the lighthouse. It no doubt had an enormous and prestigious attendance, not that Kyle, Jack, or anyone from Andrew's daily life could have cared less to even notice. What mattered was that his dear friends and those who'd raised him, such as Norma Jean Pearce, were in attendance.

The funeral began as Der Bund and especially Nacht Waffen funerals usually do, with the attendants singing the following song, with a small orchestra off to the side of the funerary stage.

Ich hatt' einen Kameraden
Einen bessern findst du nicht
Die Trommel schlug zum Streite
Er ging an meiner Seite
In gleichem Schritt und Tritt

In gleichem Schritt und Tritt!

Eine Kugel kam geflogen
Gilt's mir oder gilt es dir?
Ihn hat es weggerissen
Eir ligt mid for den Füßen
Als wär's ein Stück von mir

Als wär's ein Stück von mir!

Will mir die Hand noch reichen
Derweil ich eben lad
Kann dir die Hand nicht geben
Bleib du im ew'gen Leben

Mein guter Kamerad

Mein guter Kamerad!

After this, Jack took to the wooden stage which had been built, and gave a eulogy which, while it was beautiful, Kyle has purposely forgotten due to the pain of the event.

Max also stepped on stage to “say a few words,” talking about how Andrew had been his first friend in Project Phoenix, and a few anecdotes of their friendship, such as how Andrew had shown Max his first nude magazine in exchange for Max

teaching him how to swear in Spanish, which brought a touch of levity to the event.

Max ended with a few cutting words; “I now wonder if perhaps, Drew might still be with us today, were Project Phoenix soldiers not so routinely sent into uncertain situations, without a word of instruction?”

The funeral ended with a coffin burning of the type common in Der Bund. A coffin (empty in this case) was mounted on a canoe which was styled after a Viking boat, piled high with offerings, and then sprinkled with oil and alcohol. The canoe, coffin and all, was then pushed into the sea, and once it was some distance from shore, a flaming arrow was fired upon it. The boat and coffin naturally burn, however, the boat’s little oars are made of metal and engraved with the deceased’s name, and they sink to the bottom of the sea to drift for eternity.

It was a beautiful funeral, but Kyle couldn’t help think, if only momentarily, of the future of the Medusa unit. What did this mean for them, if a member had died before they were even off the ground?

Andrew’s headstone, as promised, was placed on Mars, in a little plot which Jack had purchased after the death of Andrew’s mother. If Andrew’s headstone is still extant, it reads as follows;

ANDREW
MICHAEL
GABRIEL
EMMERMANN
FLYNN
(1974~1992)
ALL THE STARS WE STEAL
FROM THE NIGHT SKY
WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH

I feel almost apologetic to end this volume on such a note. However, as promised, this volume has looked at the era of Kyle's life which he now calls "the quiet period," from its start till its ending, as abrupt as it was bitter. But, of course, Kyle's full story has yet to be told. Stay tuned.

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